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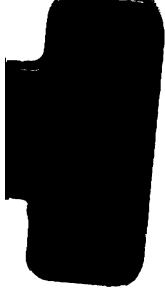
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KARMA

KARMA

A Novel

BY

A. P. SINNETT,

AUTHOR OF "THE OCCULT WORLD" AND "ESOTERIC BUDDHISM."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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KARMA.

CHAPTER I.

A PARTIAL DISPERSION.

THE Professor had no opportunity of liberating his soul in regard to Annerly's heinous conduct in stopping away from the performance of the afternoon, till they were all assembling for dinner. As he came into the drawing-room he found Annerly and Mrs. Miller there before him, and, as he was speaking, Sir John Hexton entered the room.

“There you are at last, Annerly. Well, my dear fellow, I should be more indignant at you for depriving us of your company this afternoon if I were not so sorry for you on your own account. I suppose you have heard, by this time, what you lost?”

"I have heard what took place, but—I—well, I thought it best to stay away, though I daresay you may think it very strange of me."

The Professor's curiosity was roused by Annerly's hesitation.

"But then, had you any sort of motive for not going with us? I thought it was merely a fit of apathy on your part, or that you felt lazy, and disinclined for a walk."

"I can hardly explain—I had some views on the subject which you might not concur with altogether. I should be the last man living to criticise the Baron's acts, but experiments of the kind you had to-day are not what interest me most—or, perhaps I should say, what I think it best to follow up most earnestly."

Sir John Hexton listened intently. He did not quite realise what Annerly meant, but he put a construction on the words uttered, that chimed in with his own growing opinions.

"I'm very glad to hear you say that, Mr. Annerly. I was afraid I was almost singular in my opinion here, but I don't know that

I approve of experiments of that sort either."

"What on earth ——" The Professor looked from one to another, puzzled.

Annerly did not stop to consider exactly what the Baronet meant. He was only vexed with himself for being drawn into half-explanations that could not but be misleading.

"Pray don't think I presume to disapprove as regards others. I do not disapprove in any sense. I merely meant to indicate a purely personal disinclination on my own part to join in experiments ——"

"I wish I had had your foresight, Mr. Annerly," said Sir John.

The entry of the Baron and of some of the others at this point turned the conversation, and soon afterwards dinner was announced. A certain air of constraint hung over the party, and *the* topic of the day was hardly touched upon. The events of the afternoon, in fact, had left very different impressions on the different spectators. The feeling of disturbance and alarm which Lady Emily Massilton had expressed at the time,

augmented during the evening, and she privately informed the Professor that she was not inclined to prolong her stay at the castle.

"I do not think it would be right to stay," she declared.

The Professor never disguised the amusement he felt—at all events he never failed to exhibit slight symptoms of amusement—when Lady Emily advanced an ethical motive for any of her arrangements.

"That of course settles the question," he said. "If it is a point of conscience with you there is no more to be said. But, since important business is likely to keep me here for some time longer, what course do you propose to take?"

"I hadn't thought yet because I did not know you were so far gone as all that. But, even if I am forced to travel alone through your absorption in these more than questionable affairs, I would rather do that than stay on here now."

"Quite so: but I have such a craving always to understand definitely what people mean. When you speak of these more than

questionable affairs I am in the dark, I am sorry to say, as to what you intend to convey."

"You may affect to be so, but I cannot think a man of your intelligence can be so really. While the little things that took place here were such as one could suppose either conjuring or mystification of some kind, it was not necessary to take a serious view of them; but after to-day the case is different."

"Different? Well, to be accurate the experiment of to-day is not different except as regards scale from some others we have had; but if you think it different what then? What is the question you put in your own mind, and apparently answer in some way, when you say the affair is more than questionable?"

"It is obvious, though you choose to ignore it. The thing done to-day was no trick, it was miraculous, and the power that did it cannot have come from any but a bad source."

"The Devil!" The Professor ejaculated the word, not in its capacity as an oath, but

as an acknowledgment that he had at last taken Lady Emily's meaning. His amusement was no longer feigned, and—penetrated with a sense of comicality, though this did not provoke open laughter as there was no one by to appreciate the joke with him—he sat down on a low chair and slightly rocked himself to and fro in silent ecstasy. The conversation was going on in Lady Emily's room after the general dispersion for the night had taken place. She had requested the Professor to come to her for a few minutes, as she had something to say to him.

"You may laugh, but, though I never pretend to be a specially religious woman, I do not choose to follow you to the opposite extreme. I do not want to stop here any longer under the circumstances, and I wanted to know first of all whether you would leave this place with me, as we came here together."

"Certainly I will not leave this place at present."

"Then have I your permission to tele-

graph to Brussels and join my brother George there, if he is able to receive me?"

Lady Emily was never more loftily dignified than when she formally asked the Professor's leave for any such withdrawal into the bosom of her family as that now proposed. The Professor politely intimated his concurrence, and rose to go. Lady Emily, however, had been nettled by his treatment of her theory about the origin of the occurrence in the wood, and could not refrain from a parting shot.

"You will not find I am the only person here to take the view of this matter that I do, though for the moment you are so content in your own scorn of it."

"I don't think scorn is the word; it is only amusement. The idea is very amusing; but—er—is our party here to suffer any other losses that you know of on the strength of this idea?"

"I do not think it probable that Sir John Hexton will wish either to stay here any longer or to leave his son any longer in Baron von Mondstern's care."

"Ah!" The Professor paused for a

little, but, after a few moments' reflection took his leave, without asking any further questions.

But the information just given him struck him as highly important. He had not been paying very much attention to Reginald Hexton, but it suddenly occurred to him as something monstrous that the boy's fate should be decided by an exercise of his father's authority in obedience to so stupid an impulse of feeling as that which Lady Emily had betrayed. He felt sure that the Baron would not want the boy to be taken from him. He conceived the notion that it might be well to give him a warning of what was in contemplation without loss of time. He had only parted from the Baron ten minutes previously, so he thought there would be no indiscretion in seeking him out. Perhaps the Professor, whose thirst for information was now raging more fiercely than ever, was unconsciously moved to some extent by an inclination to pay the Baron a nocturnal visit in his own room. Mere curiosity would not have justified this, but to tell him

about Sir John Hexton's intention would be to render him a service.

The Professor made his way at once to the Baron's study in the turret. He had entered the room—the Baron's voice having bidden him come in—before he was struck by the notion that offering help, as it were, in his own affairs to a man with the Baron's attributes, might be rather a nonsensical thing to do, from one point of view.

"I am not used," he said, frankly, "to thinking myself a fool, but it just occurs to me that I may have come on a fool's errand. I came, at any rate, with the intention of doing you a service, but you may know already all I have to tell you."

"Sit down and receive my thanks in any case. What was the kind intention you had formed about me?"

The Professor described the impression which, as he had gathered from his wife, was Sir John Hexton's idea about the alliance which enabled the Baron to perform the feat they had witnessed, and his intention in reference to the boy.

"I feared something of the kind It is deeply to be regretted."

"But I imagine you will have your own ways and means of arranging things as you please—as you think right."

The Baron sadly smiled and shook his head.

"You do not quite realise as yet the way certain rules govern the exercise of occult power. It would be quite out of the question to talk of employing any unusual measures to put a constraint upon Sir John Hexton's acts in this matter."

"Doesn't that seem rather fanatical. You would not do him any harm, of course; but if, as I can fully realise, it is much better for the boy to be with you than with him, why not *oblige* him in some way to consent?"

"There is nothing more impossible for me."

"But surely pressure of some kind could be put ——"

"With an ease you can hardly imagine. Sir John could even be inspired with the wish to leave his son here, and would be quite unaware of the fact that he had been

psychologised so as to wish this ; but to produce that effect on him would be to commit a disastrous mistake, to do a very wrong thing. I am only at liberty to employ ordinary means to save Reginald from what would certainly be for him the terrible misfortune of being set in the midst of the corruption of a great English school."

"Well, I only wish I could psychologise Sir John for you. I'd run all the risks, cheerfully."

The Baron put this suggestion gently aside with a smile and a movement of the hand.

"But you can very likely help me greatly in the matter," he said, "by using your natural influence with Sir John. Reginald's education is far too advanced really to make him suit any school he could be sent to ; and yet it may not have been carried on along the usual lines in a way that would simply enable him to take a high place in an ordinary school at once. Perhaps you could ascertain that yourself, by conversation with the boy, by sounding his knowledge and capacity a little, and then report to Sir John accordingly.

"All right ; but it does seem ignominious to try and accomplish the result required by persuading Hexton. He's not altogether a fool, as ordinary people go, but he would be the hopeless slave of a prejudice once formed."

"It's very grievous, indeed, and I am deeply distressed about it ; but we must do the best we can, and for any help in this matter you will render me I shall be deeply obliged."

"It does seem so odd to hear *you* talk in that way when you *could*, no doubt, have your own way so easily."

"We can talk over the ethics of the matter more at leisure. But about practical measures, as you sometimes say. I wonder whether Annerly might not be able to get us out of this dilemma."

"I can't understand Annerly," said the Professor ; "it would be too absurd to suppose him affected by the same notion that Sir John has taken up, and yet some words of a vague nature that he uttered just before dinner would actually seem to imply that."

The Baron laughed.

“You are quite right to acquit Annerly of thinking me in league with the Devil. But what was said?”

The Professor explained, as far as he could, and the odd way in which the Baronet had evidently imagined Annerly to be on his side.

“That innocent misapprehension of his may render us a service. Pray do not disturb it. I really think Annerly *may* help us, and I will ask him.”

CHAPTER II.

A DEPRESSING JOURNEY.

MRS. MILLER was unable to make out what possessed all the people—as she frankly expressed it—next day. She sent up in the morning to the Baron, asking him would he do her the favour to come and speak with her a few minutes in the octagon room, if he was not too busy, and then she declared her bewilderment.

“What are they all rushing away for? Mrs. Vaughan surprised me a little at the time she went, it seemed so strangely sudden; and now Lady Emily is unable to stay another day, she is so urgently wanted by her brother in the Embassy at Brussels; and Sir John Hexton has urgent affairs, too,

which recall him to England ; and now, to my amazement, Mr. Annerly has just been to say he must be going too. What is the matter with them all ? ”

“ You may be quite sure of this, Mrs. Miller, that they are none of them going away on account of any failure on your part to be a perfectly gracious and agreeable hostess. Such events as we had yesterday are unsettling to people’s minds, in different ways. I am not surprised.”

“ But Annerly ? It’s too stupid, really, of Sir John ; I did think he would be more teachable ; but still, there he is, you know. If he thinks you have sold yourself to the Devil, all one can say is, he has been born a couple of hundred years too late. I suppose that’s why he wants to be off, and Lady Emily too, for that matter ; but Annerly puzzles me altogether. Do you know, Baron, he expressed himself so oddly last evening, just before dinner, that if I did not know him so well I should really be shaken about him. What do you think ? *He* can’t have got any absurd notion in his head, can he ? ”

“ Dear Mrs. Miller, do not be uneasy about

Annerly. I have seen him this morning, and I assure you his devotion to the subjects which interest us is quite as keen as ever. The coincidence may seem strange to you, but I am sure, in wishing to leave us so hurriedly, he is governed by motives which are quite unlike those which may render Lady Emily and Sir John Hexton disinclined to stay. In all probability we shall see him back before very long, for the rest of our party I think you will find very faithful to us for some time to come. And don't you think, though we shall have been reduced in our numbers, we shall still be a very pleasant little party?"

"But do you know about Mr. Annerly taking Reginald away? Is that by your leave?"

"Yes; I heard of the arrangement only an hour ago; and, in truth, my leave is not required; for Reginald, having rejoined his father here, is under his authority, clearly. But I don't disapprove of the plan settled upon. An ordinary public school in England would be a place for which Reginald is quite unfit; but Mr. Annerly will be able to put

him in the care of a private tutor near Cambridge, where he will escape some evils that might otherwise befall him. I would rather have had the boy with me a while longer, but there are some points to be gained by the plan now fixed upon;—at any rate it is an acceptable compromise, and I am truly glad it has been agreed to by Sir John. I should be sorry if any delay endangered it.”

Annerly had fallen in obediently rather than cheerfully with the plan in which he had been required to play a part. It was a wrench for him to leave the castle just then; it was with an effort that he undertook the care of Reginald, and his establishment at a private tutor's. He had seen but little of the boy, and was not, as some men are, naturally prone to take pleasure in boys' society. Never self-assertive or caring to take a lead among people he was with, he preferred always to be with companions to whom he could somehow look up, rather than with those who might be expected to look up to him. But he would have done anything rather than make difficulties about

the first request put to him by the Baron, and he even accomplished the painfully-uncongenial task of volunteering to advise Sir John about the education of his own son.

To his great surprise he found this advice, which he would *not* have been surprised to find himself snubbed for offering, very quickly assented to. Sir John had a certain sense of duty to his son, and a distinct wish to withdraw him from the Baron's charge, but he was far from being moved by a personal desire for the boy's society. It would have been a disturbance of sundry plans of his if he had himself been obliged to take Reginald back to England and see about putting him to school. To get all this trouble suddenly lifted off his shoulders, in a thoroughly creditable way, and extricate the boy from the possibly uncanny control of his uncle, without too seriously offending that too-powerful uncle, seemed, to him, a master-stroke of policy.

“ My dear Mr. Annerly, I don't know how to thank you. You can arrange this matter ten times better than I could myself, and it

will save me a lot of trouble. There's no one here but yourself I should have felt like trusting the boy to just now, but with you the case is different. I know you feel as I do about some things. I don't want to discuss them in detail here, and it is quite enough that we understand each other.

Annerly was in the dark as to the meaning of this, but it was not his business to raise difficulties between himself and the Baronet. He had only feared that it would be impossible to smooth away those which probably existed. According to his instructions he said that he wished to start for England immediately, and the hurry of his departure again chimed in with Sir John's views. In this way he would be enabled to see Lady Emily as far as Brussels, without infringing the *convenances* by travelling with her quite alone. She meant to leave the castle that day, and they could all go together.

His task thus proved plain sailing for Annerly; but still he did not like it. He did not like aristocratic society, orthodox society, or boys' society; and he was sent

away with all those three conditions in very forcible operation. He was aspiring to take a plunge into a new life, of an exciting and mysterious sort; he would have been prepared for heroic ordeals; he would have welcomed privations, or perils of a romantic sort; but he was merely called upon to incur some familiar disagreeables and transact a tiresome piece of business in every-day life. As a struggling young man with a first-rate degree, teaching, in some way, would have been his natural path in life on leaving the university, but he had always declared he would sweep crossings rather; and he had forced his way, with no small trouble at first, through the outworks of professional journalism into a position of reasonable success and of fair literary credit. Now he found himself, only for a brief space it was true, but still for the moment, care-taker of a boy and patronised by a baronet. There was something chilling in this being the first incident of his apprenticeship to mystic study. He railed at himself internally for the ill-temper he felt, but still he felt ill-tempered.

It was a mercy at all events, he reflected,

as they four—Sir John and Lady Emily, Reginald and himself—sat in the railway-carriage, on their way to Cologne, that he had not been invited to take charge of Reginald's education altogether. He felt it his duty to try and get into some conversation with his young charge; but the boy was depressed and reserved; very gentle and polite, but as awkward at making conversation on his side as Annerly himself, and the effort languished. Lady Emily and Sir John were in fairly good spirits in the opposite corners.

Lady Emily was generally exhilarated for a time on parting company with the Professor, and on this occasion she was parting from him under conditions which especially suited her. She had some confidences, moreover, to convey to her companion, which interested them both very deeply. Annerly made no attempt to understand what they were talking about; but he would have been quite unable to make out even if he had tried, as the scattered remarks which reached him referred to various letters which she gave Sir John to read.

"Isn't that enough to go upon?" she asked aloud, after some of these had been perused.

"It ought to be enough ten times over," Sir John replied.

But this meant nothing in particular, and the more important part of the conversation was carried on in a low voice, under cover of the rattle of the train. Annerly, however, was no more desirous than able to hear what they were saying. Only once was his attention involuntary arrested. He heard or thought he heard Sir John pronounce the name "Miriam Seaford,"—a magic sound in his ears. Had it perhaps merely been some name, something like that which excited the vibrations of his own memory? What possible connection could there be between *her* and the conversation of two such people as Lady Emily and Sir John Hexton. His own restless imagination had deceived his outer senses, he told himself; and yet, though the name had never grown to be a strange sound in his own inner hearing, the pronunciation of it, or even what seemed the pronunciation of it, by another person,

jarred some fibres of sentiment not yet, it would seem, quite extinct. Conversation of a sustained kind with Reginald proving impracticable, his thoughts went slipping back along the train of associations thus aroused.

It is unhealthy work, but still who does not at times let the creative faculty within him paint fair pictures of what might have been? Things of course were better as they were. For occult study, and the rapid development of the higher spiritual faculties, he might be fitted—for woman's love he had certainly not been destined (though Miss Blane had been good enough to try and make him think otherwise). Still (to while away the hours on this tiresome journey) was it not curious to think how soon the lower practical difficulties, that seemed to make the realisation of his love-dream at the time impossible, would have been dissipated had she put her hand in his and trusted to him altogether. She had not been fit for poverty—that he knew; but if she had dared it for his sake she would never, as a matter of fact, have had to face it. And she would have dared it if she had not been

tampered with, he thought. Pleasant things said in long past, but not forgotten, interviews came back to his memory. It was in no way her fault. The only thing that was not bitter, in the thought of all that gone by, was that she was never to blame; except perhaps for a certain weakness. Bah! why think of it at all? But, then, why not? Surely the unhappiness that had come to him out of that whole episode could no way be increased. Why cheat himself by pretending to think that he could shut the recollection of it all out of his thoughts? He had even a certain measure of success in literature and the world—hardly trying for it, hardly caring for it—and that had come to pass in about four years only. How would four years have affected her beauty and her sweetness? She would be just the same now that he had known her.

He did not dwell much on the fact that she had since linked her life altogether with that of another man. That merely emphasised a condition of things he had regarded as quite final in any case. The man was a mere name to him, and hardly that; for he

never thought of the name, and sometimes went near forgetting it. She might have gone to another planet for all the thought he had of ever seeing her again. But what a strangely different thing life would have been if that had been realised that was only dreamed about! He could remember the short time in his life when he had been happy. What a singular sensation that had been, how finally and entirely obliterated from existence since! It had been clearly a sort of accident which had led him astray out of a life of which the destinies for some unfathomable reason were altogether gloomy into a state that might be normal to other men, but was ruled off from the possibilities of development he was subject to. The wise thing to do was not to expect anything resembling happiness for one instant. Different people had different aims in life. If he clearly recognised that he had no expectation of happiness that would perhaps be the best way of rendering unhappiness best bearable.

So occult development was a *pis aller* for him if he treated the matter honestly. It

was rather contemptible that things should be so. Were they really so? If he should see Miriam Seaford waiting for him at the next station, willing and able to be all his fancy had painted, and to take up their lives where they had been abruptly severed, would he deliberately get out and join her and send back word to the Baron that he had changed his mind about devoting himself to occult study? Perhaps it was impossible to say what he *would* do in the absence of the opportunity of really making a choice. Perhaps he was doing himself injustice. Of course there was no doubt about the superiority, in the scale of Nature, of the man who devoted himself to perfecting his spiritual growth, a matter affecting his destinies for incalculable æons to come, as compared with one who accepted happiness instead, in one earth-life for a score or two of years. On the other hand might there not be time enough, in eternity, for spiritual evolution, even if a man postponed all efforts in that direction for the present, and floated along the natural current of evolution, which the occult student sought so marvellously to

hasten? Well, anyhow the time had gone by when it would be necessary for him to pray not to be led into temptation.

They got to Cologne in the evening and dined there in the refreshment-room, and then distributed themselves in appropriate compartments of a sleeping-car for the night-journey to Brussels. Wrapped in his own thoughts, which cut him off entirely from all real companionship with his fellow-travellers, Annerly was glad to be rescued by the conditions of the night-journey from the pretence of behaving sociably. Of course he felt a deep dejection of spirits after all the brooding reflections of the afternoon; and he went through some revulsion of feeling as he lay down in his berth resenting his folly in cultivating unwholesome fancies. What a crisis that day's thinking, however, might be in his destiny, if the abnormal faculties the Baron exercised and amidst which he lived,—for he had often implied that other unknown superiors exercised such faculties and powers unseen in a far greater degree than he himself,—what a grand internal cure might be wrought in his

Annerly's, nature, if something exhilarating and inspiring, helping to confirm and strengthen his enthusiasm for the occult life, could happen to him that night. If his inner spirit could be released for a time as Merland's had been, to feel the glory of the superior spiritual existence as freed from the trammels that fettered the soul in its physical prison! In his room the night he was called by the Baron he had had evidence showing him that the Baron *might* become aware of writing which he should produce in privacy. Clairvoyant perception once operating might as well follow him in the flying train as in the seclusion of his own room at the castle. It was possible that he could call the Baron's attention by writing something then and there. He fumbled about for his pocket-book in the coat hanging up within reach, and, tearing off the blank page of a letter, waited for the first moment of steadiness in the train as it stopped at a station to write. Then he put down a few words—an appeal to the Baron for a sign—and put the paper under his pillow.

A night in a sleeping-car is seldom spent in an unbroken span of sleep. Annerly was half-awake and half-asleep the greater part of the night, thinking in the conscious intervals of the paper under his pillow; alive as time wore on to the fact that nothing special had occurred to him subjectively, but refraining from the examination of the paper; that, he thought, should at any rate wait for the morning. It was at a very early hour in the morning that the train reached Brussels; and among his earliest preparations for leaving it Annerly took out his experimental note, glancing eagerly to see if any words in blue-pencil handwriting had appeared across it this time. Not a word or a mark—the paper was just as he had prepared it. With a feeling half of disappointment, half of contempt, for his own too confident hopefulness of the previous evening, he crumpled up and threw the note out of the window.

CHAPTER III.

AN OLD LOVE.

It would have been possible for those of the travelling-party, bound for England, to have gone at once to Calais, but Sir John explained that he would take this opportunity of looking in on Lord George at the Embassy, and would beg Annerly, if he did not mind, to join him in waiting one day at Brussels. There was a lot to see in the place, he said. Annerly had never been there, and would enjoy a look round at the old town and the picture-galleries. He would see Lady Emily to her destination, and join Annerly and Reginald at the hotel. Annerly fell in with the arrangement apathetically. He did not particularly care to see Brussels,

but he was not in any special hurry to get on, except for a vague desire to have done with his present task as soon as possible; so he and the boy went to the hotel the Baronet directed them to as the best, and the other two drove to the Embassy. It was still so early that Annerly, established in his own quarters, having seen that Reginald was comfortably provided for, lay down and slept for awhile, then made a deliberate toilet and came down to the hall of the hotel about ten. He was aware of a strange feeling of torpor and apathy, afterwards he conceived that his sense of oppression might have been a kind of presentiment, but for the moment he only recognised it as an even more pronounced indifference to everything than was usual to him, though that sensation was but too usual. In the hall the *concierge* gave him a note that had been sent by Sir John. The Baronet explained that Lord George had put him up at the Embassy, that he hoped Annerly would amuse himself the best way he could, and go on with Reginald the following day without waiting for him. He might come or he might not.

It was all one to Annerly. He did not trouble himself to criticise the Baronet's arrangements by a passing thought. As a matter of duty he went for a walk with Reginald along the boulevard after they had had breakfast, and then to the pictures, at which he gazed phlegmatically. In the afternoon he looked wearily over the papers in the hotel reading-room, undertook in reply to inquiries from the head-waiter to dine at the *table d'hôte*, and then took refuge in his room again. He had not often spent so vapid and purposeless a day, but its *ennui* was all in the task he had accepted, like the *ennui* of the railway journey. He and Reginald rendezvoused in the hall at the appointed time, or a few minutes after, for he was a little late in commencing the slight change of dress appropriate to a hotel dinner, and they went together into the *salle à manger*. The waiters motioned them to the two seats reserved for them at one of the long tables, the other seats being already occupied on both sides. His face was turned towards Reginald, on his left, as they sat down; to take an interest in the passing

travellers, who might be his fellow-guests at the hotel, was about the last thought that would have occurred to him, and he had looked at no one individually as they had walked up the room. Lethargically, as he unfolded his napkin, he turned towards the lady on his right, who looked half round at him—she had recognised him ten seconds sooner than he knew who it was; and then, dashed against his consciousness like a great wave of the sea against a rock, came the perception that he was sitting next to Miriam Seaford.

There was nothing said for some little while by either of them. The lady seemed to shrink a little from her neighbour, and the expression of her handsome features betrayed a shock of feeling on her part, though its precise nature could not exactly be read. She was beautiful—not in the brilliant style of Miss Lucy Vaughan; her complexion was very lightly tinted, but its texture very delicate and smooth; her hair grew rather low down on her forehead, giving a Grecian, Clytie-like contour to the head; and the light-brown hair rippled away

on either side and swept round to the back in some fashion of her own that suited her, and that she kept to, regardless of more prevailing methods of arrangement. The eyes were of a very perfect violet; the mouth attractive rather by reason of its rich expressive outline than praiseworthy for small proportions; and the parted lips, as Annerly gazed at her, drew in a deep breath which made her broad bosom heave perceptibly, even beneath the high, black silk dress she wore. She had always been fond of wearing black, against which the delicate tints of her neck would gleam with fascinating lustre.

Annerly interpreted her look as one in which displeasure predominated. The light clatter of the dinner-table was already established; he spoke to her in a low voice; under cover of this, quite unheard by the others.

“This meeting is quite accidental. Shall I leave you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said stiffly.

Was she with her husband? Annerly wondered presently in his own mind, with a chilly feeling of resentment against the

unknown man asserting itself in his breast, almost for the first time. He looked at the person sitting beyond her. It was no husband, at all events—a lady—one much older than herself, slight, dark, pleasant-looking—quite unconscious, so far, that her companion had found an old acquaintance—engaged, then, in a careful study of the *menu*, propped before her against a wine-glass, and in the leisurely consumption of her soup.

A busy waiter presented Annerly with the wine-card.

“No, thanks,” he said; “I will drink water.”

The lady of the *menu* looked up and motioned to the waiter for the card.

“What wine will you have, Mirry darling? You’ve been tired to-day—will you have some ——”

“No thanks,” interposed the younger lady, hurriedly; “none to-day.”

The other lady seemed distressed and urgent.

“Please, dear aunt, I would rather not.”

“Aunt,” she had said. Ah! he knew of an aunt there had been—a *bête noire* of

his in old times. All her relations had been *bêtes noires* then—but he had never seen her.

The storm of feeling he had been affected by, at the first instant of recognition, was subsiding a little now. He began to eat the soup set before him, and to try and think collectedly what was the right and best course to pursue—whether to make some excuse to Reginald, get up quietly and go away, or to try and enter into conversation as an old friend, calmly and courteously ignoring the past. He felt he would rather, before leaving her, let her know that he bore her no malice and harboured no resentment against her. Still, it was difficult to say anything which should disguise the deep springs of infinite tenderness for her that welled up as of old at the sight of her, and flooded his whole soul as he sat beside her. She remained silent, paler than before, and had answered one or two insignificant remarks of her aunt almost in monosyllables. At last, disregarding all thought of framing a course of policy towards her, he said what was in his heart about her—one set of ideas on the subject, that is to say—very simply.

"I should like you to know that I hope very earnestly you have been well and happy since I last saw you."

A look of something like surprise crossed her face, and a contraction of the brows, as though it were an effort to speak.

"Thank you. I have been very well."

The conversation did not progress rapidly. After a further pause, Annerly said—as the conversation of the other people near them rose a little, and made a shield for his few private words,

"No one can hope more sincerely than I that you may always be able to say that in all senses."

So far, her own brief fragments of speech had been uttered with a cold, almost repellent tone, but in answer to his last remark she said, more gently,

"You are very generous. I am glad to hear what you say."

"I do not claim to be that; but I should shrink from being thought capable, by you, of having any other feeling about you than what I have expressed."

A great change was imported into their

conversation by her next words, though they were as meagre as those which had already passed. It was she who asked him a question this time.

“Have *you* just come abroad ? ”

There was nothing in the question. It might have been put to him if they had really met at that *table d'hôte* for the first time. But it indicated a willingness to talk.

“At this moment I am just going back. I have been staying with friends on the Rhine. I have been travelling a great deal — round the world, and so forth.”

He was wondering, while he spoke, at the thought that she was not Miriam Seaford any more. To him she was never thought of by any other name. And yet by this time that name would have grown quite strange in her ears. He pronounced to himself the name that must properly be hers now. He had no inclination to pronounce it aloud. She must be travelling with her aunt, and no one else at this moment, surely? Otherwise the husband, had he been with her, would have been at the *table d'hôte* un-

less he were ill, perhaps. Annerly wanted very much to know what were the general outlines of her life. She must have left the stage, because he knew that for long past her name had not appeared in any theatrical announcements. But was she living in England, or abroad?—was she the wife of a rich man, or how was she circumstanced?

“Are you beginning a tour,” he asked, “or ending one?”

“Not exactly either. But my aunt and I have been staying at places abroad for some weeks past.”

He did not pay so much attention to the *banalités* they were exchanging as to the sound of her voice, and the special peculiarities and turns in her pronounciation, little minute individualities of manner, which he had dwelt upon so fondly of old, and remembered now as they reappeared in the few sentences she let fall. What a strange bewildering sensation to be near her again, and yet with an invisible wall between them, to be talking to her, and yet measuring out meaningless morsels of speech, and holding back the floods of emotion, explanation, in-

quiry he would have discharged upon her if he had been free to do this without fear of offending her, without being deterred by the general ignorance of her adventures since they had parted, which he was oppressed by.

The long intervals, during which they said nothing, continued to intervene between the few questions and answers they exchanged. It seemed equally impossible to go on with trifling conversation, or to venture on any serious topics. Eventually he said,

“Whatever you can conveniently tell me about your life these last three years would interest me very much. I have had as nearly as possible no opportunity of hearing anything about you.”

“I left the stage altogether about a year and a half ago. I have been living latterly with my aunt.”

It was not a very complete narrative, but there was enough in it to be puzzling. Perhaps she merely suppressed direct reference to her marriage to avoid putting things in a painful way to him. But what had become of the husband?

“You left the stage I suppose,” he said, “when—you married?”

Colour gathered in her cheeks at the word, and her brows drew together. With a recurrence to the more chilling manner in which she had spoken at first she said, curtly,

“I never married.”

“What!”

The revelation did not make any material difference to him. They had not parted because of her marriage. The division between them had been quite definitely established before that had, as he believed, taken place; but still it involved a new revulsion of feeling to learn that all the reflections on that subject that had passed through his mind, from time to time, had been groundless—that he had somehow been picturing her wrongly in his mind all this while.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, “I have been misinformed.”

In some respects the state of things just disclosed made the position more embarrassing than ever. A married woman, she would not have imagined that in addressing her

now he could be seeking to renew their old relations. Still Miriam Seaford as she had been, he would seem merely importunate—a creature deficient in delicacy of feeling, who would not keep out of her path, though she had plainly intimated her wish that he would. He had again a strong desire to clear himself by explanation; but these jerky bits of conversation, liable to be overheard, would not lend themselves to more confidential talk.

“I am on my way to England,” he said presently, as the serving of the dinner drew towards its close, “and I leave Brussels by the Calais train in the morning about eight. I should like to say a few words to you before going, which I cannot say quite conveniently here, and if I might be allowed to join you in the hall or salon after dinner for a few minutes I should be grateful.”

She hesitated a little before replying, and then said simply,

“Very well.”

Shortly after they all rose from the table, and the large crowd of guests dispersed in various directions. Miss Seaford put her

arm through her aunt's, and passed on with her in advance. Annerly purposely lingered behind a little. He divined that she would want to give Miss Jameson—he at last recalled the aunt's name not without difficulty—some explanations; and he sat down at the table again, trifling with the nuts and raisins of the somewhat meagre dessert, to give himself an excuse for waiting a little while longer in the *salle à manger*. He frankly apologised to Reginald for neglecting him during dinner.

“I knew the lady I have been talking to years ago, Reginald,” he said. “I have been a stupid companion for you, but I could not help it.”

“It is very kind of you to travel with me,” the boy said. “I am sure it is I that ought to apologise for being a burden on you.”

As usual, Reginald was decades older, as far as his language went, than his actual age. Annerly was touched by the quiet unselfishness which took no heed of his gloomy temper during the day, and his entire distraction during the dinner, through

which Reginald had sat without exchanging a word with any one.

“Thank you for putting the thing so nicely, but if I am morose and a bad companion that is as our friends here would say *plus forte que moi*. I am sorry, but I can’t explain at present. Now would you mind waiting for me anywhere about—say in the reading-room—for awhile? Then, perhaps, we can take a turn on the boulevards later. Just for the moment I have again something that I must say to those ladies.”

“I will wait for a little in the reading-room, and then go to my own room if you do not come to fetch me. Pray, Mr. Annerly, don’t put yourself out for me. I am really grateful to you, and would not trouble you more than I can help. Perhaps you will be longer with your friends than you think.”

The boy’s voice dropped a little as he said this, and there was a touch of sadness in his tone, a sort of wistful flavour which Annerly interpreted, and was much touched by, as meaning that he shrank from the neglect he anticipated, though politely proposing to

leave his temporary guardian full liberty of action. Annerly put his hand, with a more affectionate feeling than he had developed towards the boy before, on Reginald's shoulder as they walked out of the dining-room immediately after this, and thanked him, while adding that they would have their stroll on the boulevards all the same in a very little while.

In the hall of the hotel were sofas, where the guests sat about after dinner, as well as in the public rooms. Annerly looked about here for the two ladies, at first in vain, but presently he saw the elder standing where a turn of the great staircase concealed a further corner from view. He advanced in this direction, and then she moved away across the hall in another direction, towards the reading-room. Coming to the place she had occupied he then saw Miss Seaford seated alone on a *causeuse* concealed by the staircase in a nook that was thus screened from general observation.

"It is very very kind of you," he said, as he came up, "to grant me this opportunity.

I had no expectation of the privilege of speaking to you alone."

"There is no reason why you should not do so—if you wish to. I am only surprised that you should care to speak to me at all."

"If I could have said to you three years ago what I want to say now I should, I think, perhaps have felt the pain of losing you a little less acutely; but I may be self-deceived in that. I only mean that I have often wished very much I could have said this, which simply is—that I quite recognise your ample right to cancel the too-sweet promises you once half let me think you made to me. But I would rather have surrendered my claims on you, such as they were, at your frankly-expressed demand, than have been as it seemed not quite trusted by you to be ready to make a sacrifice on your behalf. My love for you would have been very base and selfish if I had been capable of making it hard for you to get rid of my claims when you wished them to be given up. Of course, it would not have made the pain of the sacrifice itself any less, but it might have been something

to feel sure that you knew I had loved you truly enough to have made it, by my own act, at your bidding."

Miss Seaford made as if she would speak.

"I think——" she began, but her lips were not quite under control, and she got out a handkerchief instead.

"I think it was by a kind of mistake in the working of my destiny that my ill-starred life was entangled for a little while with yours. I only wonder that you ever permitted it to be for a time so entangled; unless, indeed, it had to be that I was to endure some suffering that could hardly have accrued to me in any other way. But I only indulge in this repining that you may understand just how the thing stands in all its bearings. Then, perhaps, some thoughts that have rankled with me will be at rest henceforth."

"I should have thought," she said, "that you would have wanted to kill me if you suffered like that."

He could smile at the extravagance, as he sat beside her—gently putting the idea aside with a gesture.

“If you see what I mean altogether, you will do me the justice, in looking back, now, to know that I never harboured in my heart one thought on the low level of anger against you. I was —— well, no matter what I felt. Of course, in losing you, I lost all that gave life any value for me, but that was no fault of yours. Why should you have bestowed yourself upon me if you did not choose to do so? My love for you imposed no duty upon you. It was my hard fate, no fault of yours, that it could not lead to what I had extravagantly expected—— or hoped for; I think now, looking back, I can hardly ever have really expected it. I have never, never blamed you, Miriam, neither then nor since ——”

She made an impatient little movement of her foot, though her head remained bent down and she did not speak, putting her handkerchief to her eyes silently every now and then.

“I know,” he went on, “that it could not matter to you if I had presumed to blame you, but for my own sake I have wanted you to know that that was not so.”

"You don't understand me," she said then, getting command of her voice with some little difficulty, but speaking plainly when the effort had been made; "I think you had great reason to blame me; to hate me for treating you as I did, and I can't understand why you didn't."

"That view of the matter hardly needs an answer from me; and I am sure you never suspected me of not loving you, though you may have thought of me as perhaps reproachful, when I was not so really. So little was that the case that when I heard of you as married I may honestly say that my most earnest wish was that you might be happy in that condition. I did not love you the less. Life without you was not the less prolonged desolation, but I did hope that for you it might be brighter than it possibly could be for myself. And I am unable to understand now how I was misled. I had a letter when I was in China from Walter Maxley, whom you may just perhaps remember, definitely telling me that he had met you travelling in Switzerland with your husband. It is unaccountable that he should

have mistaken some one else for you, and have written to me about such a matter as if he were certain."

She had lifted her head to look at him with a feeling of either tenderness or commiseration when she last spoke, but now again bent down her head. He did not see the colour in her face, but her voice was constrained.

"He was mistaken at all events. I was never married."

"It is strange: but it was not the imagined marriage that put us asunder; and even the discovery of the mistake does not justify me in staying with you any longer now. It has been a relief to me—for the moment it seems so at any rate, even if to-morrow I may think that old wounds have been but needlessly reopened—to have met you again, and to have had out this explanation I will say good-bye now, and if I could ensure your happiness from this time forth—by any act of mine—" (he had almost formed a more impassioned sentence, but cancelled it as it rose to his lips lest it should sound too much like an implied

entreaty) — “then you would certainly be happy.”

He rose slowly from the seat beside her, and put out his hand. It could not but be that she saw it, but she made no motion of her own to meet it. So quick was he to imagine himself regarded with aversion that he drew back his hand, and, again murmuring “Good-bye,” was about to leave her when she looked up and motioned to him to sit down again.

“Stay, there is no hurry. Will you not sit down again? There are things I should wish to say to you.”

Annerly sat down. He did not consider the situation in any deliberate way at all, but he was conscious of delight in being near her for a little while longer, though the blessing was but to be evanescent.

“Did you think I wanted you to go away without shaking hands?”

“I had no right at any rate to press you to do so if you did not want. Surely a woman may choose who shall be her friends, and those not chosen have no right to complain.”

“I could have no better friend than you ; and I never had anything against you—but it seemed to me before we parted that you would insist on being a great deal more than a friend or nothing.”

“Very likely I should have tried hard to be more. Of course you were right to act as you did. It was the only way, except, as I say, that I should have appreciated, and I would certainly have justified, more trust at parting.”

“Perhaps I was cruel through not understanding you properly ; though I ought to have understood you. I think I did really. I suppose I was cruel through being cowardly, and not wanting a parting scene. There is no help for it all now. But after all this time, and the changes, and things that must have happened, it is different. I can tell you how sorry I am to think I gave you so much pain, and you will forgive me. But I know you have done that all along.”

“Indeed I have ; or rather I would never allow, in my own heart even, that there was anything to forgive. I quite entirely consider you were right. I was asking alto-

gether too much of you—too great a sacrifice in more ways than one. But if you do not mind me going on talking I will show you all my thoughts about you very willingly.”

“I want—now everything of the old sort, you know, between us is over, and so long past—that I may not lose sight of you again altogether. I don’t know yet exactly myself what I want, but I have been feeling very sorry for having hurt you so much. If it is any relief for you to talk to me, and hear me say this—then I am very glad we met.”

“Relief? Well yes, it is that in a way—more and less. It is for the moment something like happiness to sit beside you again, free to say what is in my heart about you—though, as I say, it will not be that to-morrow altogether. You see it is no news for you that my love for you was very deep, and that is merely another way of saying that it was necessarily very lasting. Since I may make the state of the case clear to you, I need not hesitate to tell the simple truth—don’t be afraid that I shall trouble you or be importunate; but of course there

has never been a moment from when we parted last till now when I have loved you any less than I always did in the old time."

"Oh, Mr. Annerly, don't say or think such things. It's a kind of madness with you. There's no reason for it. I'm not in the least worthy of being put on a pedestal like that—you wouldn't if you knew."

"A kind of madness? Well, I am not mad in any other way that I know of; but in this respect I think I have had experience that shows I am incurable."

"Perhaps we ought to part—even now altogether."

"That I should say depends upon whether I can be of any service to you. It will be something like a relief, may be, to me if you keep up so much communication with me as may enable me to feel sure you can always apply to me if you need me in any way."

"But which way is it best for you? I do not want to be spoiling your life more than I can help ——"

Annerly almost laughed.

"You must not think of that," he said;

"it really is not worth while—my life has been quite irretrievably spoilt in the way you mean already. Not through your fault, through my own vain presumption in thinking I could chain you to it."

"Would it not be best for you," she asked, after a few moments' pause, turning her head round and looking him full in the face, "to be quite cured of loving me once for all."

"Undoubtedly, far, far best; quite immeasurably the best thing for me."

The answer seemed not quite what she had expected, and she looked puzzled for a few moments. Then she said,

"I see what you mean: you mean it would be impossible."

"Unhappily, yes."

"Perhaps if you knew the real Miriam Seaford, instead of the ideal you may have got in your own fancy, it would not be so impossible."

"This is the vainest fancy of all."

"At all events, I know what would be best for you—what you yourself even acknowledge would be best."

Annerly saw she had some reserved meaning behind her words in her own mind, but attached no great weight to this. He only suspected the words in one bearing they might have.

"I hope you do not misunderstand me. You will talk of extravagant hypotheses, and so you force me to refer to others. Evidently it would be best, in one sense, for any man to be cured of loving a woman who does not want his love—but such a best as that is a forlorn alternative only; no more than that. Never mind me, however, except that the best thing you can do for me, practically, is to let me see you and do what I can for you from time to time, if any such opportunities arise."

"Wouldn't it be a kind of torture for you if you still care for me like that?"

"A lesser kind, I think, than some other sorts I know of. Remember this, Miriam—at least I beg your pardon—it is strange to me to call you anything else, but I will try."

She only shook her head sadly, neither

resenting nor encouraging the use of the name ; and Annerly went on.

“ What I was saying was this, that you would do wisely, I think, and certainly most kindly to me, in taking facts for granted. My love for you is an immovable fact, and anything done on the supposition that it may be movable can only give pain and trouble. But it need not be a disturbing fact for you in any way. You may quite trust my self-control. I know it is the fashion for lovers to say that they must be lovers or nothing. That position seems to me not dignified but merely selfish. As I can't be your lover I would assuredly rather be your friend than a stranger.”

There was something in this declaration that touched her again. She was never quick or impetuous in her movements or words. But she slowly looked round to him again, as he sat beside her, with something of the old affectionate expression he used to awaken in her eyes.

“ You are very good to me,” she said ; “ of course I might have known you would be.”

She put her hand out to him as she spoke, and he clasped it earnestly for a few moments, and bent his head over it slightly.

“I wish it had not been so, for your sake,” she added; “but now—I would rather talk no more, just at present. We shall be returning to England in a very few days. Will you give me an address to which I can write to you?”

Annerly gave her a card bearing the address of his chambers in London.

“I shall be away at Cambridge for a few days, but will take care that my letters are forwarded. Probably I shall be back there myself as soon as you are in town. And you? I should be glad to know where to inquire after you.”

Miss Seaford gave him her aunt’s address.

“But I will write to you; I will indeed. Good-bye.”

She put out her hand, this time spontaneously, and left it in his as long as he chose to hold it—a few seconds longer than would have been necessary for a formal parting—and she looked up at him as he said good-bye with something like the old

look he remembered so well. Then Annerly went up-stairs to his room to be alone for a while and review the strange incidents of the evening.

So then this was the measure of his resolution about pursuing a life of monastic spirituality. He had come again within sight of Miriam Seaford and his heart was throbbing with as much wild passion of love for her as though the last three years had been annihilated. He had not been even offered the temptation of a return to the old relationship with her. He was not called on to weigh the alternative of happiness with her as his wife against the further developments that might follow adherence to the programme pointed out to him by the Baron. He was simply put in her presence and everything else was forgotten. Or was it that just because he had *not* contemplated any resumption of old relations with her he had drifted without resistance into the conversation that had taken place? How would the bare renewal of acquaintance with her—the futile pain he would suffer in being frequently reminded of the happiness he

might have enjoyed with her if she had regarded him differently—interfere with the progress of whatever might be possible for him in the path of occult development? His thoughts were not very connected; he hardly strove to render them so. The situation made no claim on him for any immediate decision. To have seen her again and poured out loving words in her ear; to have held her hand in his—if only that—once more; to have won her back again to the extent of gaining friendly words from her, and kindly looks and indications of a readiness on her part to renew some sort of intercourse in the future—all this was simply like convalescence after distressing illness, like ease after pain, or rest and comfort and security after shipwreck. It was a state of things to be dreamily enjoyed rather than criticised. It crossed his mind to notice, as a striking fact, emphasising the bitterness of the past, that this barren consolation of having simply talked with her a little again should be a consolation, although it conveyed no promise of any joy in the future whatever. He was no more in a position to possess himself of

that, which he knew too surely to be the only source of happiness possible for him in this life, than he had been yesterday; and yet he had crossed a gulf since then, and the world wore a new aspect. It was certainly not logical, and perhaps it was idiotic of him to feel any sense of relief in consequence of what had passed; but surely, he said to himself, he had gone through enough to warrant him in welcoming any sense of relief, however indefensible in reason.

After awhile he went downstairs again to seek out Reginald, but the boy had acted as he promised, and had left the reading-room, relieving Annerly of all further duties on his account that evening.

In the morning they were both up early to catch the Calais express. They met in the hall, where Annerly looked round, thinking to himself how the features of the place would be impressed for life upon his memory; and he was crossing it to go to the *salle à manger* for their breakfast when the *concierge* came up to him with a note.

“The lady sent this down last night, sir,

to be given to you before you started this morning."

The mere sight of the familiar handwriting, on which his eyes had not rested for so long, gave him a renewed thrill of emotion—all the more that the pink paper on which it was written and the appearance of the envelope and its little monogram were teeming with associations for him. He had accumulated a large store of these pink notes at one time, and he had carried them about with him on his travels with Merland, done up in a packet, with the only portrait of her that he ever possessed. But he had never been so frivolous in his mourning for her as to reread them. He wanted no artificial stimulus to refresh his memories of the past; and he only unfastened the packet once to bid a final farewell to its contents, one day, when he buried it in the Atlantic Ocean on his return to England from his trip round the world. He had a vague feeling, at the time, that he might be able to turn a new page, and would be wisest to put these useless mementoes of the old one out of sight, once for all. It had not been a very suc-

cessful manœuvre, he sometimes thought afterwards, but at all events he had not seen the old handwriting from that day till this, when the burly *concierge* of the Brussels hotel handed him a specimen of it once again, a specimen that might have taken its place in the old series, and that even bore the old scent ; for Miriam Seaford had a trick of individualising her habits in all respects, and always used the same note-paper and the same scent, just as she always did up her hair in the same way, and kept as far as fashion would allow to some individualised fancies in her dress.

The note was brief and merely said—

“ DEAR MR. ANNERLY,

“ My aunt bids me say that she will be happy to see you, if you like to call on us after Wednesday next. I am living with her now. But I will write to you before then as I promised.

“ Yours sincerely,

“ MIRIAM SEAFORD.”

CHAPTER IV.

RESTORED.

ANNERLY was a vigorous and clear-headed politician, a journalist distinguished by a keen and incisive style, and withal a man whose external appearance was not calculated to mark him out as a prey to sentimental imaginings. But there had not been many consecutive hours since his first acquaintance with Miriam Seaford when her image had been altogether absent from his thoughts. His love for her had coloured the whole fabric of his mind. It might be employed on this or that pursuit, but its underlying sensations would be derived from the inarticulate current of longing for her that was always flowing through it. This

was now swollen to a torrent again; and during the few days that he spent in the fulfilment of his mission about Reginald, it obliterated all other trains of reflection.

With dinning sound my ears are rife,
My tremulous tongue faltereth,
I drink the cup of a costly death
Brimmed with delicious draughts of warmest life.

The lines would, over and over again, sing their passionate music in his heart. The little poem "Eleanore" had been one he had always associated in his own fancy with Miriam Seaford so closely that it had become, in the later years, replete with emotions too distressing to be needlessly stirred. He had shunned the verses ever since, as he had shunned looking at the old pink notes. But now the colour of all such associations was changed; and the verses came to the front again in his imagination, especially the last two, which seemed peculiarly appropriate to the strange undefined revival of the past, which had suddenly come about.

What did Miriam mean by the attitude she was taking up? What did he himself desire? The conversation at the hotel

might, perhaps, be set down altogether to the surprise of the moment; to her regret for having given him so much pain in the past; to an impression that she might have formed during their separation, and might have wished to verify, that perhaps he had now recovered from his wound. But the talk they had had would have shown her that he still loved her as much as ever, and yet she suggested that he should again come and see her—not to perform any specific service for her, but in a general way to resume intercourse. It might be, indeed, to drink the cup of a costly death that he would obey her summons, but he did not pretend to himself that there was any hesitation in his own mind as to whether he would go. Was the whole catastrophe of his life, that seemed so final and irrevocable, going after all to be redressed? Was he going to enter on a life of happiness? The conviction that every possibility of that sort was quite out of the question in his case had been settled in his belief so long, that the new contingency now presented to him was bewildering. And yet why should it not be

realised—since Miriam, after all, seemed leaning once more towards accepting him as her lover ?

Very little passed between Annerly and his companion on their journey to London. They had both lost the feeling of being awkward in not talking much. Reginald was always contented to sink into a book, and he had brought two or three with him, which took him off Annerly's hands in the train. Moreover, Annerly had developed a very kindly feeling towards him, in connection with his beautifully simple self-obliteration of the previous evening, and the few words that were exchanged had friendly impulses behind them. He even came to be interested in Reginald in a somewhat new way, because he realised, during their journey together, that the quiet self-possession and intellectual advancement the boy exhibited had probably some more subtle explanation than he had at first suspected. They had been talking a little of the programme which was now marked out for Reginald's education ; and Annerly had been thinking in his own mind that perhaps the seclusion of the

boy from the rough companionship of others might weaken his masculine fibre, even though special teaching, adapted to his peculiarly precocious mind, might yield larger results in that way. He had asked Reginald whether he did not regret losing the games and amusements of a big school.

“I don’t care about that sort of thing, and they seem to waste so much time at schools, from what I hear. I must learn to read Greek and Latin thoroughly well, but I hope to get back to my uncle again when that is done—so the sooner it is done the better.”

“Don’t you mean to live in England when you grow up?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t any plans. Something or other will seem the best thing to do when the time comes, I suppose.”

While they were talking Reginald had held down the book he was reading with his thumb in the place and the fingers outside, and Annerly noticed that the nail of one of these fingers was somewhat distorted as if it had met with an accident.

“Have you hurt your hand?” he asked.

Reginald looked at his finger, following the direction of Annerly's glance, and laughed.

"That's a very old hurt. It happened more than a year ago."

"What did you contrive to do to yourself?"

"Well, it was a piece of stupidity of mine that my uncle didn't approve of at all," said Reginald, but in a tone that showed that the disapproval had not borne heavily on his conscience. Annerly asked what was the joke.

"Well; I'd been reading a good deal about the Indian fakirs and yogis, who show their tremendous will-power by bearing pain. So I thought there might be some great wonder to learn about that way, and I thought I'd try. I managed to tear off one of my finger-nails —"

"What!" cried Annerly in amazement, "you mean you did it on purpose?"

"Yes; it was very difficult to manage, but I did, just as my uncle came rushing in to stop me. He put on the nail again, and bound my finger up. Of course no ordinary doctor could have made it grow again at all,

and even he did not make it grow quite straight."

Annerly sat looking at the boy in silent wonder. Having been pressed with questions he had told his story very simply—he had not even brought it out in a spirit of boasting. And this was the boy that he had been thinking might be in need of a little Eton or Rugby "roughing" to strengthen his masculine fibre! It was borne in on his understanding very forcibly that in some way Reginald must be other than what he seemed—no mere commonplace son of Sir John Hexton's, forced prematurely in his mental development, by living with the Baron.

"I'm glad I heard that queer story," he said. "I am the less likely to misunderstand you—and may be the better able to look after this business of the private tutor for you. I feel as if I ought to apologise for having talked to you sometimes—as if you were a boy!"

"So I am a boy," said Reginald, laughing; "but you know in a general way what my uncle is, and anybody who wants to be like him has got to begin young I believe."

“There’s food for a great deal of reflection in that,” said Annerly.

“I don’t mean that those who begin young are the only ones. Others may be better qualified, and begin later.”

It struck Annerly that his present state of mind was not an illustration of his own especially superior qualifications in that line; and that it was perhaps a somewhat quixotic notion that had recently been leading him to think the path of occult progress one he might be able to tread. But the nature of the obstacles in his way precluded him altogether from discussing them with Reginald, and after a little while they both resumed their reading.

The journey was a doubly impressive one for Annerly, for he had a vivid sense of the contrast between all he knew of Reginald—of the strange destinies probably in store for him, of the scenes in which they had both recently been taking a part, and on the other hand of the dull ignorance concerning all these mysteries on the part of the people they sat among in railway-carriages and on the steamboat and in hotels. Then, beyond

this, he was moved by the suppressed under-current of strong personal excitement due to the revolution that had taken place in his own most private affairs.

He had no accommodation to offer Reginald at his chambers, so they spent one night at a London hotel, and went on the following morning to Cambridge, where Annerly instantly set about the inquiry with which he was charged. His acquaintances in Cambridge were many. He had always remained deeply attached to the scene of his first successful struggle from the lower intellectual life in which he had been born, up into the more exhilarating mental atmosphere of cultivated society, and he had maintained the habit of frequently returning to the university, to resume his cap and gown for awhile, to attend dinners in hall and chapel services, and to exercise the various privileges of his fellowship. A couple of days enabled him to find a suitable home for Reginald; and, bidding him good-bye with a hearty goodwill established between them, that the earlier experiences of their journey had scarcely seemed to

promise, he went back to London on the third, and as he entered his own room his eyes were gladdened by the sight of a pink note lying on the centre table. Eagerly opening it, he read as follows—

“ DEAR MR. ANNERLY,

“ I am true to my promise this time—will you say for a wonder? I am going to write a letter that may lead to pain and unhappiness for both of us, or to the reverse—who knows? But I must warn you not to be too much elated, at any rate, by what I am going to say first.

“ I really did not think that your love for me would have remained so strong, and I don't think now you are to be at all congratulated on being so faithful; for I don't think it is in me to love anybody in a way that would at all correspond to the sort of love you have for me. But I am writing to tell you that if you like to resume the old relations there used to be between us I am willing that things should be so. It would be nonsense for me to seem to doubt whether you wish this after what passed between us at Brussels, but I may be pre-

paring a great humiliation for myself in saying this, for you have much to learn about me before you must answer this.

“For one thing, your friend was mistaken when he told you I was married, but there was a time when I wished to be, and believed that I was going to be. I shall not tell you all about this myself—I shall leave my aunt to do that for me. But, though I dare say you will be very glad to hear what I have just told you—that you may now have me for your wife if you wish it—it remains to be seen whether you will wish it, after you have seen and talked with her.

“Entre deux amants il y a toujours un qui aime et un que se laisse aimer. I am but offering you *me laisser aimer* again, and if you decline, then, at least, it will have been that you are cured of your love for me, and I shall not have to think of myself any more as having ruined your life for always.

“You can go and see my aunt to-morrow afternoon. I shall not be at home myself; and your impatience to see me—if you are impatient still—must wait a little longer. About that you will hear from my aunt.

"I do not think till then, anyhow, that I need hesitate to call myself

"Yours affectionately,

"MIRIAM SEAFORD."

"Miriam, Miriam, my darling!" was the first comment that Annerly made on the letter, as he leaned forward in his easy-chair, stretching out his arms to the vision of his beloved that rose before his mind's eye. And yet the veiled significance of her explanation was not lost upon him. "Some one has betrayed her," he thought. "The fool—the fool."

There was a tinge of pain perceptible amid the delirium of his own joy at the thought which his imagination quickly grasped. This story of Maxley's, of how she had been seen "travelling with her husband"—there could hardly be much doubt, after what she now wrote, as to how the mistake arose. And she could not bring herself to write details—*that* she had left to her aunt.

He did not want details. They belonged to a horrible nightmare-time that might now be put away and obliterated. Had she

loved the other man? There was true pain in that conjecture. But surely there could have been no love of the sort that would be abiding. There would certainly be many people who would condemn him for not condemning her, in the face of what he now learned, for not at once “plucking her image from his heart,”—as he scornfully phrased the idea. But how little such criticism, he thought, would take account of such love as his for Miriam! He loved *her*; not what other people might think about her. If she had done this or that which she ought not to have done, she was none the less herself. To pass through life without her was the sum of all misery; to pass through life with her would be, if not absolute happiness—for experience could only show what new possibilities of suffering his later destiny might hold—at all events, the only condition of things which made happiness possible.

How little conventional moralists—who would find his too easy forgiveness of her sin, discreditable—how little they would understand the only thing which really did

make him—not hesitate to accept her offer, for he knew, in his heart, that he could not pretend to hesitate for one fraction of a second—but feel some touch of shame in embracing it, as he did, without hesitation. He was cutting himself off, within a few days after he had been wishing to bind himself to it by vows, from the life of occult study and development, the marvellous avenues of which had been half-opened before him by his intercourse with the Baron, and across the threshold of which he might almost be said to have passed. He did remember, as he sat with Miriam's letter in his hand, how the Baron had said to him that evening in the chamber—better not bind yourself by vows, even uttered in private; it would be better to give up soon, rather than late, if your resolution is likely not to be strong enough to carry you all the way. He was acting upon that advice but too promptly. He was indeed giving up soon. He was to try the very thing he had so unjustly scorned poor Merland for aiming at. He was going to make a little paradise on earth for himself for a few years, and to turn away from the

path which led to the far grander heaven he had dimly discerned as connected with the elevation of his soul to a higher spiritual level altogether—one on which the single individual loves of our own stage of development would be, in some mysterious way, not deadened but superseded.

It was very sad that human nature was weak, but with him, at least, love for Miriam was strong. Wise, wise friend the Baron had been—could he have been prophetically wise?—in warning him against the formal enunciation of vows which it might have been humiliating to break, and which it would have been useless folly to have kept—in view of the feeling with which his whole soul was now flooded. He would have to write to the Baron and tell him what had occurred, and to Merland too. But first he had to write a report of his operations in Reginald's interest at Cambridge. He could do that without touching the other matter, and keep his confession waiting till all was definitely settled again between Miriam and himself.

The day was a tedious one to pass. "I

might have been with you at this moment, my own love," he thought, "if you had not been distrustful of me even now." But this reflection was not overwhelming. The delay did not threaten to be protracted. Perhaps by next evening he would be with her. Slowly the time wore by. He did some work. The distraction of happiness is unfavourable to work, but less so than the distraction of misery, which he had long been trained to resist.

He went out in the evening, and dined at a literary club he had lately been enabled to join. Most of the usual frequenters were away on autumn travels, but the small party that was left found him strangely good company. He had been respected in a way hitherto for what he had done, but had not been found a cheerful *convive*. This evening he talked and laughed and talked like the rest. Some one remarked that he was deucedly improved since he had joined the Vasile Club.

At the earliest reasonable hour next day he knocked at Miss Jameson's door. The lady lived in the neighbourhood of the

Regent's Park, in a suite of rooms which Annerly found to be a modest "flat," but comfortable and pleasantly furnished.

Miss Jameson was at home, and he found her alone when he was shown into her little drawing-room.

"You got a letter from Miriam, I suppose, Mr. Annerly?" she said, after a few nervous greetings.

"Yes. I have come to see you, Miss Jameson. I suppose she is not herself at home?"

"No, she is out—in fact she has gone into the country."

"The country! Has she gone far—or for long?"

"Well, no—I will tell you about that afterwards—if you wish to know."

"Miss Jameson, before you go further let me assure you that nothing you can say to me—*nothing*, whatever it may be—will make me cease to wish to know where Miss Seaford is, or cease to wish to go to her wherever she may be—if that is not contrary to her wish. I do not know definitely what it is you have to tell me; but it

may help you to speak freely if I say at the outset that it *cannot* alter the abiding wish of my life—to have Miriam Seaford for my wife.”

Miss Jameson gazed at him earnestly.

“She said that would be so; but I wasn’t sure. And she would go away all the same. She’s a strange girl, you know. Nothing will ever move her from whatever she chooses to do.”

“She’s all the world to me, Miss Jameson, as of course you know. I had acquiesced in the surrender of my hopes about her till the other day, and had no thought of proposing to restore the old engagement between us. I would never have importuned her; but now I am free again to tell her how eagerly I resume it. There are some preliminary explanations to pass between us, I understand. Shall we not get them over?”

“I’m sure I want to get them over,” said Miss Jameson, piteously, “but it is so hard. Dear Miriam was very, very foolish, and of course she was very wrong.”

The devoted aunt’s lips quivered as she launched herself thus on her task. Then the

handkerchief had to come into play, and for a little while longer the explanations were again postponed.

“Mr. Annerly, I’m sure you love Miriam truly. I haven’t known you, but I’ve heard about you. But, indeed, I don’t think you love her more than I do, and it nearly killed me when she made this terrible mistake. Oh, it’s too hard to make me go over the story.”

“But I do not want you to. Do understand, I want to hear as little of this dreadful episode as possible. I understand it, I believe, already quite sufficiently. I am not anxious to hear another syllable.”

“Miriam insisted that I should tell you the plain truth, that there could be no possibility of misunderstanding afterwards. Of course we thought she actually had been married to the man privately, but she was misled about this. It is all over now, and her own father will not have anything to say to her. He’s a very good man, but very unbending. He always hated her going on the stage.”

“Wretch! Does he hope to be forgiven his own sins?”

“Ah well, it does not make much difference you know, because for a long time Miriam has been either independent, or has been with me. I haven’t a great income, but I have enough to give my own Miriam a home; and you’re better off yourself now than you were, Mr. Annerly, ain’t you?”

The unselfishness of the inquiry was so perfect that it was cleared of every trace of offence. Annerly reassured Miss Jameson on this point, and asked when it was intended that he should see Miriam.

“You’re to go down to her at Purfleet. There is a farmhouse there, where the woman is an old nurse of hers; and she sometimes goes there when she wants quiet and country-air for a few days. But I haven’t told you all you must know yet. There must be nothing left for her to tell. It is very terrible for all of us, Mr. Annerly, but we haven’t got to the end of it yet. There may be divorce proceedings.”

“How do you mean?”

“The horrid man was married before, it

turns out, and his wife has found it out. It was about that matter that we were in Brussels, to try and prevent the affair being made public."

Vague impressions of a very painful nature began to cloud Annerly's mind.

"In Brussels." It suddenly crossed Annerly's recollection that he had heard the name Miriam Seaford pass between Lady Emily and Sir John Hexton in the railway-carriage on the journey to Cologne. "Who then is the man?" he asked. He had been conscious before of a wish to avoid knowing this, but the question forced itself from him now.

"We knew him by another name at first; but he is really called, it seems, Professor Massilton."

The name fell upon Annerly like a blow on the head with a sort of stunning effect. The tale told him had never seemed fully to penetrate his sensibilities till then. As a frightful episode of the past, now happily over, he could have driven it from his thoughts to a great extent. As a shadowy horror, not to be associated with names or

places, it was swept away by the tornado of his passion. But now it was not only emphasised by having names assigned to it but suddenly illuminated with the most terrible precision by his own familiarity with all the persons concerned. He gave vent to an incoherent ejaculation.

“What is the matter?”

“I know him.”

They both felt, without stopping to analyse the reason why, that the situation was somehow made a great deal worse in this way; and Miss Jameson began softly crying again, while Annerly sat motionless for a while gazing fixedly at the opposite wall.

“I ought not to have told you where she was till we had got over all this,” said Miss Jameson.

Annerly, for an instant, failed to catch the point of her remark. Then he recovered himself and rose, as it were, from the shock of the revelation just made.

“Miss Jameson, I told you that nothing you could say would affect my feeling for her. The shock of what I have learned is distressing for various reasons; but I tell

you again *nothing* can change my love for Miriam. It must always be a part of myself—whether a source of joy or of sorrow. I am glad to have had this revelation over before seeing Miriam; but now, when can I go to her?”

“Mr. Annerly, I *do* think you will be able to make her happy when this horrible business is over. I’ll tell you how to find her.” And then Miss Jameson gave him exact directions, the time of a train he would be able to catch that afternoon, and showed him, on a map, how he should go when he reached his destination. There was no immediate hurry, and he stayed talking with Miss Jameson for some time longer. There was a bond of union between them in the *culte* to which they were both devoted.

It was a lovely summer evening when he got out of the train, between six and seven, at Purfleet, and took a field-path after walking a little way along the road. The impression that had been created on his mind, at first, by the mention of the Professor’s name had given way as he approached the place where he was to find his love

waiting once more to restore herself to his arms, to the intoxication of that one idea. There might be trouble and anxiety arising out of all this dreadful business in the future, but what of that? If Miriam was to be his, that fact would be to his life as the sun to the world. There might be clouds, but still it would be day—while, if the sun were away, though the sky should be clear it would be night. And the dawn of this day, for him, would be the dawn of a polar summer—after so long a night that the blessed sunshine seemed a remote experience of another existence.

“Heavens! what I have gone through!” he thought. “Are the years of this long pain over, and the weeks, and the days? and now it is a question of minutes when life is to begin again.”

A nervous anxiety possessed him. Would not some accident happen to the train to defeat his expectations?—would not some dreadful mistake turn out to have been made by her aunt in the directions she had given him? It would surely not happen that for him, with his long-established theory that his

life was cursed, the cream and final glory of such long longed-for happiness was really waiting him among these lanes? He hurried on and came to the stile Miss Jameson had spoken of, after which the path led through a little coppice—a few light trees at the end of a field. He had crossed it and was amongst them, and then—there was a low seat in view in the shade of the trees, a little to the right; and in a plain, grey dress, with a glow of ruby ribbons and white lace at the neck, she was waiting for him. The black night had given way and the day was shining in full glory once again.

“Oh Miriam! Miriam, my darling!”

He sat beside her, and put his arms round her, not with any sudden gesture, but as though her restoration to him were a solemn act that had to be accomplished reverently, and drew down her lustrous head upon his shoulder. She had taken off her hat, and the warm evening light shone upon the wavy masses of her shining hair, and on the beautiful brown-pink tints of her complexion. She resigned herself to his embrace with a willing smile, though with a

shadow that was half sadness, half contrition, crossing its expression, and let him take at leisure the kisses he had been starving for so long.

“You see I expected you,” she said. “Is not that trusting to your love, indeed, at last?”

CHAPTER V.

A NEW OPENING.

A few days were spent very quietly at Heiligenfels after the partial break-up of the party on the departure of Lady Emily and the others who went away with her. But the Baron's suggestion to Mrs. Miller—that they would remain a very pleasant little party still, in spite of the defections—was amply vindicated. Mrs. Miller, for her own part, was more than compensated for the reduced gaiety of the house, by the opportunities she now enjoyed of becoming more intimately acquainted with Mrs. Lakesby Blane and the Professor were steadily occupied with certain literary work they had taken in hand in connection with

the psychic experiences they had recently acquired; and for all of them the awe that had at first overwhelmed them in the wood, when the great manifestation had been made of the Baron's abnormal powers, had given place to a sense of exhilaration at being in close and friendly relations with so extraordinary a person. There was more in the Baron's visible attributes to evoke affection on the part of people round him, than to excite mere wonder. Merland was the only member of the party who was not quite in his usual spirits; but his temperament was elastic, and the influences of the castle were of a kind to emphasise very strongly his interest in occult matters, which had roots of its own in his nature quite independent of his recent exaltation of feeling in regard to Miss Vaughan. The contracted group, moreover, was knit together more closely than the larger gathering had been previously, and they dropped at once into the habit of assembling in full force at breakfast, as well as at dinner, finding no *ennui* or sameness attaching to conversations constantly brightened by the

fragmentary explanations the Baron would now frequently venture upon concerning the mysteries of the sciences or pursuits to which his life had been devoted.

And in a different way it was scarcely less interesting for them to obtain from Mrs. Lakesby the daily assurance, which her faculties enabled her to supply, that, on a different plane of Nature so to speak, they were constantly in presence, without having been previously aware of this, of beings in a different state of existence from themselves. It was in the direction of observations having to do with that other plane of existence that Mrs. Lakesby's clairvoyance was most frequently exercised.

"There's no interest," she pointed out to the Professor, "in poking about among other people's rooms and houses in your astral body; and it's not always a nice thing to do. It's taking a mean advantage of them. But my friends on the other side of the hedge are always glad for me to go to them, and I am glad for them to come to me."

"Too glad," said the Baron, "sometimes, Mrs. Lakesby, perhaps."

"Now, don't be too strict with me, Baron."

"I am only anxious that you should not be too cruel to yourself."

"Now, you two superior people," said the Professor, "are talking in enigmas. If we got all this unravelled, humbler mortals might learn something."

They were talking one evening after dinner, the pleasant effect on the air of the warm summer day just past, enabling them to sit out on the terrace, where the light incense of their cigars and cigarettes floated away towards the river.

"The question," answered the Baron, "about which Mrs Lakesby and I are not quite in accord ——"

"Poor Mrs. Lakesby!" said that lady, interrupting. "I object to have the case stated in so crushing a way as that."

"I'm no Pope, that people must be wrong if they disagree with me; and it is quite as likely our friends will agree with you as with me if they realise the problem—though, of course, I think I am right."

"I'm sure," Mrs. Miller put in, "that

Mrs. Lakesby would not deny that, only she wants to see the folly of it for herself, like young girls first going out into society."

"Dear ladies," pleaded the Professor, "if we could deal with this matter one at a time would it not be better? Suppose the Baron has the first innings."

Mrs. Lakesby assumed her demurest good-school-girl air, and Mrs. Miller only satirised the Professor by turning to Jem, who had not opened his lips for some time except to emit cigarette smoke, and told him not to speak again till he was spoken to.

"The difficulty," said the Baron, "has to do with understanding rightly what is the nature of the entities Mrs. Lakesby perceives by the help of her beautiful clairvoyant sight. There is nothing in nature more delusive than the phenomena of that borderland of spiritual life that we get into when we first cross the frontier of physical phenomena. We may seem there to encounter living beings whom we may be apt to mistake for spirits of a more or less angelic order, when they are really no more than shades of former human beings, whose nobler

aspect, so to speak, is turned away from us, and imperceptible even to the higher clair-voyant sense, which perceives what may be called their astral aspect."

Mrs. Lakesby broke into a little laugh.

"I beg your pardon, Baron," she said, "I was not laughing at what you said, but at something said by an 'astral shade' there standing near the Professor."

By this time they had all grown to be familiar with the fact that Mrs. Lakesby constantly perceived *dramatis personæ* on the scene who were not apparent to ordinary spectators, and were not startled when she announced this or that spectral presence, and the ideas or remarks it would convey to her.

"What did he say?" asked Blane.

"It isn't a he. It is a she; a nice-looking old lady, with silvery hair coming long down each side of her face, and rather a large nose. What?—listening for a moment to some inaudible statement by the invisible visitor. Oh! she says her boy Arthur ought to know who she is."

"Why, that is a description of my mother," said the Professor.

"That's who she is. And she made me laugh by saying what the Baron said just now was stuff o' nonsense."

"When did she die?" Mrs. Miller asked of the Professor.

"Wait a moment," said Mrs. Lakesby; "she'll tell us herself. Eh?—" Again after a little pause she broke out laughing. "She is an old lady with a character, it seems. She says—'Tell her she's a good deal more dead herself than I am.' And then—— what? eh? She says she left our stupid earth-life when Margaret's last child was born. Who's Margaret?"

"A married sister of mine," said the Professor. "That is quite right. It's about ten years since my mother died."

"Would you ask her," suggested the Baron, "to tell us something about the occupations of her present existence?"

"She does not seem to hear you," said Mrs. Lakesby. "Am I to ask her that?"

"Yes."

After a short pause, during which Mrs. Lakesby did not speak aloud, she said—

"She says that she's very happy; but she cannot stop to talk any longer now."

Some other time she'll come and tell us more. Now she must be going. She says there's somebody here makes her uncomfortable."

"Perhaps that may be myself," said the Baron. "Let me leave you for a few minutes. Since you are having this conversation it will be as well for you to follow it out a little further."

The Baron went in through the open glass-door into the dining-hall, and crossed to the library at the other end, into which room he passed and shut the door.

"Will you ask her," said the Professor, "if she has any special communication to make to me, that she has come here to-night?"

"She seems puzzled rather. No; she says she has nothing special to say. She is often about you without your knowing it. She was always proud of you, she says—you were her favourite child. Eh?—what?—Yes; she says there is something she wants to say. The only truth about the spirit-life is to be found in occult study. That's funny. It does not quite square with

what she said just now, when she called the Baron's remarks 'stuff o' nonsense.' "

"It's all a great mystery," she says; "but we shall all find it out some day, when we join her world. She's going now. I don't see her any more."

Almost immediately afterwards they heard the library-door open. The Baron crossed the dining-hall, carrying a piece of paper in his hand. A few words were written on it—the ink still wet. He handed it to the Professor.

"Was not that what she said while I was away?"

The paper bore the words that Mrs. Lakesby had just repeated: "The only truth about the spirit-life is to be found in occult study." It was handed round and looked at with much interest.

"Why, how on earth," asked Mrs. Miller, "did you know what she said?"

"I merely knew what she would say because I took the liberty of suggesting the words to her—from where I sat in the other room, I mean. The distance was not very great for a thought to traverse. The inci-

dent illustrates what we were talking about a little while ago—the deceptiveness of appearances on what occult writers generally call the astral plane—the border-land of the spiritual world immediately in contact with the physical world. At one moment you see an inhabitant announcing, in very definite language, that a certain set of ideas is all nonsense, and the next that they are the only truth. What are we to make of that?”

“I don’t know,” said the Professor; “it is very puzzling.”

“I think it harmonises with what we may find out in other ways about the processes of human evolution which go on after the death of the physical body. The true growth of the real Ego is into a plane of consciousness superior to that which Mrs. Lakesby’s clairvoyant sight penetrates; and in exact proportion to the extent that growth has proceeded, the faculties and thinking power of the entity on the astral plane are weakened till at last they fade out altogether. That which Mrs. Lakesby just now saw was, in a certain sense, the soul of your mother most likely; but it was the soul minus all its higher faculties—or,

more correctly, an astral body but half illuminated by the soul which is gradually passing away from it into a higher state of existence. The faculties which still animate it are not conscious of the loss of their nobler companions: but meanwhile, to any one who really appreciates the position, there is something very distressing in the notion of dealing with an entity in that condition, as if it were a true soul—of treating it with the tenderness due to the real Ego of a departed friend.”

“It’s very interesting all the same,” urged the Professor.

“That’s right, Professor,” said Mrs. Lakesby; “put in a word for poor little me.”

“It cannot keep up its interest for very long, it seems to me, when we fully realise what it is we are talking with. But, apart from that, you must remember that when I have humbly ventured to suggest to Mrs. Lakesby that she should indulge but sparingly in conversation with astral spectres, I go upon other grounds. In doing that, Mrs. Lakesby, to begin with, may retard the spiritual progress of the real Ego by dragging

back his attention to the earthly existence he has quitted, and she may lay herself open to influences from the astral world that may prey upon her unexpectedly."

"It's a golden rule, my dear," said Mrs. Lakesby, in a stage-aside, to Mrs. Miller, "when you're being scolded never defend yourself. It only brings on fresh trouble."

The Professor intervened with the fatherly manner in which he sometimes wrapped up his compliments to ladies.

"Mrs. Lakesby will never grow up. She'll remain a child to the end of the chapter, but so sweet a child that nobody will complain."

"I haven't the least doubt," Blane interposed, "that the Baron speaks from knowledge, and the principle he lays down must be sound. But I would like to ask one thing—I don't ask it in any ribald spirit of mockery, but sincerely for information: If a person with clairvoyant gifts is debasing them, as we have sometimes agreed, by employing them in what Mrs. Lakesby calls poking about other people's rooms and houses,—and if she is running risks herself, and perhaps doing wrong in employing

them on the phenomena of the astral world, —what is she to do with them ?”

Some of them laughed at the apparent dilemma, as the Baron did himself, but Mrs. Lakesby affected dismay.

“ Oh, save me from my friends ! You meant well, Mr. Blane, but now I’m going to catch it you see ! ”

The Baron shook his head. “ She’d be a very difficult person to find fault with—Mrs. Lakesby would be—for everybody’s sympathies would be with her, whatever the case might be. But, happily, I am not called upon to attempt anything so presumptuous. I would merely explain that there is a third course, though no one can be blamed for not taking it if they do not feel strongly moved to do so. There is the service of the great cause and of the great work I humbly represent in your eyes, to which any persons abnormally gifted with psychic faculties from birth, may, with peculiar propriety, devote themselves. The rewards of that service are seldom to be gathered in this life, but they are great nevertheless. On the other hand, the ser-

vice itself is apt to be very arduous and unattractive in the beginning, and, even for a long while, to grow more and more arduous as time goes on."

"What is the difference, may I inquire, sir?" Merland asked, "between the career open to a person with psychic gifts, in connection with the occult life, and that which may lie before one who has no gifts, merely ardour and devotion to the cause?"

There was no room to doubt the personal bearing of Merland's question. His inclination to enter himself, so far as that could be done, as a candidate for occult instruction had been augmenting rather than declining during the last few days. While love for Miss Vaughan gilded the prospect the avenues of occult study seemed as enticing as they were ennobling. Now, indeed, the situation was changed. No sun would shine on the young man's path in whatever direction he might seek it, but if the catastrophe in the conservatory had destroyed his hope of happiness in ordinary life, at least it left him sadly free to plunge into the only refuge he could see open before him. And

the darkly romantic aspect of the occult life as it sometimes presented itself to his imagination, made it an appropriate destiny for a man who felt that he had staked more than is generally risked on a declaration of love. Perhaps other young men have sometimes viewed their declarations in that light also. Anyhow Merland measured the severity of his fall by the merits of Lucy Vaughan, and these were naturally exalted in his eyes to a very high degree.

Nothing had been heard at the castle from Miss Vaughan or her mother since they left it. A faint hope had lingered in Merland's mind for a little while, that perhaps the post would bring him a communication on the subject of the question that had remained unanswered. If only she would write to explain in a sympathetic way that the thing could not be, that would be something. But no. His proposal had been a piece of impertinent extravagance, and had been treated as such very properly. No one at the castle had any exact knowledge on the subject, and Merland was shy about asking questions that would have been too sug-

gestive; but Mrs. Miller had let fall the remark once, in speaking of Miss Vaughan, that some one had said she was going to marry Lord Millborough.

"If I had known it sooner," Merland thought to himself, "I might not have made such a fool of myself; but thrown with her as I was, I should not have loved her the less, so it would have been the same in the long run."

When he asked the question set down above, as to how far a person without psychic gifts to start with could get on in the occult life, the Baron looked at him with a kindly expression for a few seconds without speaking, and then said—

"One should never persuade a neophyte to enter on the path. One must not make the career seem pleasant or easy; but it is a stout and pure heart only that is wanted for success, not psychic gifts at first. They may not so much help their possessor as render him or her more useful to others. And the privilege of being useful is a grand one, quite apart from reward. Then you must remember that ordinary thinking has

not yet been sufficiently penetrated with the idea about successive incarnations to let people get on the right train of thought in such matters. You cannot estimate your position in reference to the occult life aright unless you know something of your previous incarnations."

"But, good heavens!" cried the Professor, jumping at this hint, "do I understand you that we can anyhow get at information about our previous incarnations? Why, it would be of all other information that could be obtained, the most pricelessly interesting."

"Why so?" said the Baron, gravely—almost reproachfully. "Except for the purpose I referred to, I am not sure if knowledge about one's previous incarnations could have any other effect than that of feeding personal vanity, and so doing one the worst possible service. It is to escape from interest in self that the student of occult mysteries should, above all things, address himself."

"Well, but really, that morality is of a very high—almost an impracticably high—order. We are human creatures, and

the constant shiver of doubt about the future that so many of us have, is just because we cannot remember the past. Now if we could be enabled to do that ——”

“I, for one,” said Blane, “should not want to exercise the privilege. I quite see the force of the Baron’s remarks, except that I would go further and say, that the escape from self would be the most delightful emancipation that could be imagined. To forget my present life, I think, would be more tempting than to remember previous ones.”

A good deal of animated controversy in which the Baron took but a trifling part arose over this point. At last Merland tried to bring the conversation back to the point from which it had suddenly diverged.

“You will remember, Baron, it was a question of mine that set them all on this subject. Now, if knowing something about my past would help me to find out, or you to tell me, what my own chances would be as an occult student—is there any way of finding out about it?”

“Well,” said the Baron, all voices being stilled at once as his tone and manner

seemed encouraging, "there might be ways of getting at some inklings about it; and that answer may, perhaps, meet another point that Mr. Blane raised a little while ago, as to what might be done with clairvoyance directed neither to physical objects at a distance, nor to the delusive appearances of the astral plane. Perhaps Mrs. Lakesby might be able to discern some pictures in the astral light for us that would prove interesting in regard to this matter of past incarnations that some of us have had something to do with."

"We are constantly happening on new surprises," the Professor said. "It appears, Mrs. Lakesby, that there is a whole realm of nature open to your observation, that as yet you have told us nothing about."

Mrs. Lakesby covered her face with her hands in mock despair. "Poor, poor, Mrs. Lakesby!" she said, commiserating her own fate, "pile all the blame on her first, of course, but kindly explain for her future guidance what on earth you are talking about."

"Will somebody," said the Professor, ad-

minister nourishment to her through a quill, and restore her strength? My dear child, we are to blame for forgetting that there was a mystery we had not asked you to solve. We are all gratitude for past favours and equally so for those to come. But this being premised, tell us the state of the case. Can you by the exercise of clairvoyance perceive the circumstances of people's former lives?"

"No, of course not!" cried the lady.

The Baron sat by with an amused smile. The Professor looked with perplexity at Blane.

"But, my dear Agatha," said Mrs. Miller—for in the intimacy that was growing up between them a use of Christian names was creeping in—"the Baron has distinctly referred us to you for information, so you must rub your eyes and look again."

"Why don't you ask the Baron what he means; *I* can't tell you, for I haven't the least idea myself."

"May we recur to you, then?" asked the Professor of their host.

"Even if Mrs. Lakesby," he answered,

"is not fully conscious of all the uses to which her faculties can be applied, that need hardly surprise any of us. But I did not intend to convey the notion that any clairvoyant search into the past would enable her to give any person, now living, a complete and connected narrative of his past lives. A very exalted kind of insight would be required to achieve that result. But I think I could suggest to her ways and means of obtaining, at any rate, some glimpses of the past that would be sufficient to interest you very much if you are content in the matter to seek, in this inquiry, some comprehension of the Karmic principle in operation, rather than the gratification of a mere personal curiosity."

"I am sure," Blane murmured, "I have no personal curiosity about myself—a most uninteresting topic."

"I have a great deal of personal curiosity," said the Professor, cheerily and frankly, "but I am quite ready to put that altogether aside. All fresh knowledge is delightful, and I should certainly be the last person to be indifferent to an opportunity for

studying Karma merely because it was not an opportunity for studying something else. Chalk out our line of inquiry, dear Baron Friedrich, and trust to us to follow it the best way we know how."

"It is only, it seems to me," replied the Baron, "for the sake of discerning the way in which Karma operates that such an effort as that I have suggested appears desirable, or even justifiable. You see, the law of Karma is almost the leading law of human evolution—if one can be allowed to give precedence to one over another of the beautiful harmonies of nature. Every man is perpetually working out old Karma, and developing fresh. This is merely a technical way of saying that every man is the product of the influences, aspirations, thoughts, efforts, and so on, that have moulded his character in the past, and is, in turn—by the direction in which he allows his energies to operate—moulding that which will be his own character in the future. But, while the principle stated in that way seems to be little more than a commonplace, it rises into wholly different importance when we reso-

lutely apply it to the whole series of human lives which constitute an individuality—a true human Ego—apart from the transitory circumstances of particular years.

“People often say nobody can alter their character very much; what he is born with he must make the best of, and his moral responsibility greatly varies accordingly—and so forth. They forget—or rather their speculation is not brightened by the illuminating truth to which occult science introduces us—that every one has an immensely long succession of opportunities for modifying his character; and that the point at which he leaves off in the one life, is the point at which he takes up those opportunities in the next. A great interval of time, as we measure time here, may have elapsed between the end of the one life and the beginning of the next; but that does not in the least degree interfere with the unity of the life process. That interval is very far indeed from being a blank period. It is filled with a life of its own, far more vivid, and for the most part, happily, more enjoyable, in an exalted sense, than the

physical periods of life. But for our present purpose we need not pay attention to that, except to recognise that it explains what would otherwise be a mystery—the obliteration from the mind before each fresh life begins, of all precise recollection concerning the outward circumstances of the last physical life. The spiritual existence which intervenes between each physical life has the effect of summing up the whole body of experiences—effort, aspiration, and so on—of the one life into so much formed character with which the Ego starts on his next.”

“But Baron Friedrich,” said Mrs. Miller, “I thought your Karma was your reward or punishment in the next life for what you did—good or bad—in this?”

“And so it is; not a reward or punishment that can possibly be wrongly adjusted by reason of being served out as such. It is a perfectly inevitable series of consequences. Your Karma determines the state of life into which you will be born, as well as your character.”

“Then,” suggested Blane, “I should be inclined to fear that your Karma goes very

far towards determining what your Karma itself will be at the end of each life; for, given a character and a set of circumstances, and I suppose, to an omniscient eye, the result would be inevitable?"

"To an omniscient eye, yes. I suppose one would have to recognise that; but then I doubt if the discussion we are now carrying on is on what may be called the plane of omniscience. We should not help ourselves much by going off here into a survey of the old conflict between free-will and necessity. We have a very distinct consciousness of free-will in the choice between good and evil at every step through life; and we need not confuse our sense of that freedom by going into the highest metaphysics of the problem."

"But the problem has a practical bearing," said the Professor, "as well as a metaphysical aspect. It often strikes me that the limits of our power to choose between different courses in life are very narrow, apart altogether from the metaphysical argument. There you are, with your character, whatever it may be, inherited

from your parents, or got at somehow, established as a very commanding impulse in your nature. And the circumstances in which you are placed, are there also with no choice of yours. How can a man help following the bent of his nature? If he is of a scrupulous, cautious habit of mind, that is his nature; and in splitting hairs as he goes along he is but following its bent. On the other hand, if he is a very warm-blooded impulsive sort of animal, with strong feelings, there you are again. He never remembers to think at the critical moments, but acts first and thinks afterwards, and that is *his* bent."

"That, my dear Professor, if you will allow me," said the Baron, "is his Karma. Of course, it is a very difficult thing to escape from its influence—in one sense impossible, but Karma is a growing force, and our free-will does enable us to modify its growth; and your bent, depend upon it, in the next life, will be either still more defined in its present direction, or inclining in a different direction according to whether

in this you yield to it without resistance or press against its influence."

"But, Baron Friedrich," said Mrs. Miller, "how are you to get rewarded or punished merely by developing a bent? Your bent might be worse than ever; but if you had been ill and poor and badly used in the last life, and were well and comfortable, and made much of next time, you would have got a reward."

"Well," answered the Baron, "let us work this out a little. What do you call the fate that determines whether you are born rich or poor, healthy or ill, clever or stupid, and so on?"

"How do you mean? I suppose that is all the accident of birth?"

"But suppose the accident of birth is no accident at all, but just an inevitable result of causes, attractions, affinities, set up by an Ego, during his last life, which impel him, when he is ripe for rebirth, to that incarnation which is best fitted to give them physical expression. What do you call the accident of birth looked at from the point of view of that hypothesis?"

“Ah!” murmured Blane, “Karma: I see the principle. It covers everything.”

“Pretty nearly,” said the Baron. “Fully appreciated it would no doubt be found to cover a great many of the most painful riddles of the earth, and the whole vast series of inequalities in wellbeing that sometimes puzzle us.”

“I tell you what,” said the Professor after a little pause; “there are aspects of that doctrine in which it does not strike me as very moral in its bearing. It would be apt to make people rather pitiless towards suffering. They would tell a beggar to be off, and be ashamed of himself for having had such an infamous Karma in his last life.”

“Do you think that would be the effect,” asked the Baron, significantly, “if such people realised that being rough and pitiless to suffering might be one of the elements in Karma which would bring such suffering on themselves next time?”

The objection and the answer both in turn seemed so forcible that they all laughed.

"The Baron had you there, Professor," said Mrs. Miller. "You'll be afraid to let a beggar pass within sight in future without rushing after him to give him six-pence."

"Dear lady," retorted the Professor, "your otherwise perfect sex will rarely keep to abstractions. My Karma is altogether too bad to be worth mending or thinking about; so never mind that."

"There is a striking inference to be drawn from this, is there not?" suggested Blane; "that the act of relieving suffering contracts the domain of suffering both here and hereafter, both as regards the recipient of relief and the agent in conferring relief; while cruelty and callousness to suffering augments it in both directions."

"Just so," said the Baron; "and we need only supplement that reflection, I think, in one way. We must not think of the rewards of good Karma as concentrated too much on material things. The opportunities of spiritual development, which a poor and even a sorrowful man may enjoy in any given life, may benefit him in the long-run so greatly

as to have out-weighed the evil of transitory sorrows; and a good Karma may thus sometimes have produced a life the mere outward troubles of which we should sometimes be apt, if we were hasty, to set down to bad Karma. *Vice versa*, also, the bad Karma may temporarily disguise its effect in physical prosperity that may bring great suffering in its train in the long run, by furnishing the possessor with so many more opportunities of emphasising what the Professor might call an evil bent."

"It would be an intricate problem then," suggested the Professor, "but still a possible problem, to work back from the circumstances of a man's life, *plus* his character, and determine what must have been the nature of his last incarnation."

"A supremely intricate problem, certainly, for any one who could not enjoy such help as Mrs. Lakesby, perhaps, might give."

"Oh, good gracious!" ejaculated the lady named, who had been following the conversation with the closest interest, but started in apprehension at being thus suddenly brought back into its focus.

"This promises to be most interesting, I see now," cried the Professor. "Mrs. Lakesby's clairvoyance in some way may be directed to check the conclusions we form as we proceed with the examination of any Karma we take up for analysis."

"Now then," said Mrs. Miller, "who offers himself for vivisection? I offer Jem."

"Jem is likely to have pressing business in Schlessig" said Captain Miller; "besides, there's nothing to analyse in Jem. He hasn't got any Karma yet. A very much more interesting subject, I'm sure, would be found in the Professor."

"*Place aux dames*," said the Professor. "Perhaps Mrs. Lakesby would tell us something about her own past lives, and then we might find out what sort of Karma produces psychic gifts."

Mrs. Lakesby gave a little shriek at the proposal.

"Cut up myself for your edification? Thank you kindly for the idea, but, if I am to wield the knife, though I do not at present know in the least how that is to be done, I don't think it will be employed upon

myself. I don't know much about the matter yet, but I know that much."

"This is false modesty, dear lady," said the Professor, "I assure you. I have no objection to be investigated myself—nor I am sure would Blane have, as far as he is concerned."

"I don't think," the Baron interrupted, "that we need carry on the discussion on these lines, because I don't think we should begin by trying to lay bare the characteristics of any one among us. Would it not be better, suppose we can manage this, to get from Mrs. Lakesby certain glimpses of past scenes in which some of us or of our friends not actually here at this moment may have played a part, and then endeavour to interpret these, to trace, as far as we can, the natural progress of persons with such and such characteristics, and then to see whether we can discern the old Karma working afresh in modern conditions?"

Every one present was of course more than ready to follow a programme distinctly suggested by the Baron, and the comments on this proposal were merely directed to the

clear comprehension of the line to be followed. It was arranged that Mrs. Lakesby should recline at ease on a small sofa that was brought out on to the terrace from the drawing-room; and, though the evening was not at all cold, the Baron expressed a wish that a warm shawl should be thrown over her.

“I’m going like a lamb to the sacrifice; but I haven’t a notion,” said Mrs. Lakesby, while she was being carefully tended on all sides, and caressed by Mrs. Miller, “what I’m expected to do. I don’t believe I shall see anything at all. I never was so dull before. Since the Professor’s mother went away I haven’t seen a creature.”

“The calm way she ignores us is charming,” remarked the Professor. “Plain mortals in the flesh don’t count.”

“If you do see anything,” said the Baron, “you can tell them. For myself I want to go away if you will allow me when I have once set you to work.”

This announcement took every one by surprise, but no objection was raised, as every one felt instinctively that the Baron’s

withdrawal would in some mysterious way be associated with whatever it might be that was going to happen.

“When Mrs. Lakesby begins to see,” the Baron went on, “she may become very much absorbed in the interest of her visions, and I think it will be better then that only one person among you should address her questions relating to these. I daresay you will all agree to let the Professor do this, but there is no reason why you should not quietly suggest questions to him.”

A few words of acquiescence were uttered in reply by Blane and Mrs. Miller, and the Baron said good night in case he might not see them again that evening, and went away.

CHAPTER VI.

PICTURES IN THE ASTRAL LIGHT.

A HUSH of expectancy settled over the whole party, and for a little while nothing was said. The Professor had taken a low chair beside Mrs. Lakesby's sofa—the others had all resumed or replaced their seats after the general movement incidental to the Baron's departure; and the darkness of the night—now that a shaded lamp which had been standing on the terrace-table had been taken into the drawing-room—gave a touch of solemnity to the preparations. It was not very dark, as a crescent moon was shining in the sky, though concealed from the terrace by the main body of the castle, and the stars were bright. Enough

light to make the terrace itself and all the persons upon it plainly visible came from the windows of the drawing-room; but the broad expanse of the heavens before Mrs. Lakesby, as she lay with her face looking outward over the river, and her back to the house, seemed a kind of proscenium before which they were all seated.

"Will she see her visions in the sky, do you suppose?" Mrs. Miller whispered to Blane, who was sitting next to her.

"She isn't in quarantine yet," said the clairvoyante herself, in her natural voice, "at all events. If anything begins to happen I'll let you know; but I'm sure I need not be sent to Coventry while I'm feeling just my ordinary self as I do now."

"Still," said the Professor, "it may be that you had better compose yourself, and be quiet for the present."

Scattered fragments of conversation of this kind went on for some little while, Mrs. Lakesby protesting from time to time against the notion of being expected to do something without knowing what she was to do, and the Professor pacifying her by soothing

words, of which she was rather disposed to make fun.

"Miss Blane," she said, after one little pause, after letting her head fall back on the sofa-cushion, and speaking in a low broken kind of voice. "Couldn't you—would you perhaps sing something?"

"Sing?" repeated Miss Blane, dubiously, wondering whether music for some mysterious reason was required by Mrs. Lakesby to promote her expected ecstasy. "Sing?" to Mrs. Miller. "What does she want me to sing, I wonder?"

"I think," murmured Mrs. Lakesby from the sofa, "I should feel better," with a deep sigh, "if you gave us—'Champagne Charlie!'"—starting up at the last words with a merry laugh.

"Oh! child, child!" remonstrated the Professor, "will you never be serious? For a moment you took us in completely. We give you all honour and glory for the victory, but ——"

"Hush!" interrupted Mrs. Lakesby, in quite another tone, but still sitting up on her

sofa, and looking eagerly forward. "Look there ; why surely you must all see that."

She pointed out over the balustrade of the terrace, towards the top of a tree, which, standing as it did on much lower ground than the castle—the hall falling away steeply on that side—was about on a level with the pavement on which they sat. A silvery column of vapour, and yet something which as they watched seemed instinct with a movement of its own, and to grow more into the likeness of a human form, floated over, or just rested as a cloud-wreath may rest on a hill, on the topmost twigs of the tree. All present were equally able to see it ; the distance at which the ethereal figure stood was about twenty or thirty yards. Presently it leaned forward, and floating across the short intervening space settled, swaying very slightly from side to side, as though stirred by a faint breeze upon the furthest end of the balustrade of the terrace itself. As the party happened to be grouped Mrs. Lakesby was thus between the figure and the group, for they were collected at the left end of the terrace, looking outward,

and the figure appeared at the extreme right end. That it was distinctly human in shape and gesture was all that they could recognise. The form was too misty and spectral to exhibit features that could be plainly identified; but Mrs. Lakesby gazed intently without speaking, and then slowly lay back on her cushions. The figure advanced slowly towards the group along the edge of the balustrade, but grew fainter and fainter as it approached, and vanished from view altogether when about at right angles to the position occupied by Mrs. Lakesby.

“Yes, I’ll come,” she said, rolling her head a little from side to side on the sofa-cushions as though seeking the most comfortable position. She spoke in a calm measured voice, slowly at first, but more firmly and easily as she went on. “Are we going a long way? Oh, that we are, I can tell you. Why, this is another country; it’s a warm country this is, isn’t it? I haven’t been here before, have I? What a lot of ruins there are about.” After a little pause, “Oh, I say, what a curious effect that is—I like to see that. Why should I say what I

see? You can see it too. Very well; I will if you like. What looked like ruins awhile ago seem finished buildings now. This is the street of a town and there seem to be a quantity of people all about—so queerly dressed; some few in long white robes all folded about them and some in short tunics with bare legs. There goes a man carried in a chair by several others, and men walk in front with some thick-shaped weapon carried leaning against their shoulders. Where does he go?—the man in the chair you mean? He's been put down at a house-door. There are a lot of attendants about. It's misty to me for a moment. Oh, now I can see inside the house where he was put down, a great big wandering place with a lot of rooms, all on one floor. I see such a lot of pillars, oh, and there's the man who was in the chair with several others. They are all lolling on sofas round a table. Why, they are eating and drinking. Goodness, what a quantity of food—dishes and dishes of it coming in, and quantities of attendants. What lazy wretches to be lying down eating like that, with their great bare feet stretched out on

the sofas behind them. What's that you say? How are the sofas arranged? Why there are three of them round three sides of the table, and the fourth side is towards the door, where the dishes keep coming in."

"Good Heavens!" said the Professor softly, as Mrs. Lakesby paused in her description. "Why, she's describing a Roman banquet."

"They keep on drinking, drinking," resumed the clairvoyante. "Why, it's perfectly shocking. What? If they want to ask me questions, I suppose they can."

"Doesn't that refer to us?" Blane whispered to the Professor, "about asking questions?"

"Perhaps it does." He paused for a moment, and then in a low tone said, "How many guests are there?"

"Eh! How many on the sofas? Seven or eight only, and dinner enough for a hundred. What gluttonous creatures! But that's a fine young fellow sitting up in his place now, and holding up a glass, or if it isn't a glass, something he's drinking out of. How funny! I seem to see them drinking and waving their cups, but I don't hear anything."

“What is the young man like that you noticed?” asked the Professor.

“He’s got short, curly, black hair, and a swarthy complexion, but he’s very handsome. I’ve got a notion that he knows it too. How happy he seems, and contented, and all the others seem fond of him.”

“Is that the man you saw come in the chair?”

“No ; the man who was in the chair is sitting there at the corner, at least lolling on his elbow on cushions like the rest. He’s reading something now that somebody has brought him. How reverential the attendants seem. What? They are slaves, are they? I thought slaves were black. These people are not black.”

“What is the man at the corner like?”

“He’s much older. He looks rather grim. He isn’t so nice as that young fellow. But he gives people orders when they come to him. Everybody seems to know what he’s got to do when the man at the corner speaks to him. There’s the young fellow calling for more wine. It’s really too bad. Why, what are they doing now? How stupid!

Great men like them, they are putting wreaths of flowers on their heads. Slaves have just brought these in."

"What is the name of the young man?" asked the Professor.

"I don't know. *He* could tell you, I suppose, if he liked."

"Who do you mean by 'he'?"

"The one who is with me. I couldn't have come here if he hadn't brought me. They're walking about now, some of them. There's my handsome young fellow. How tall he is, and what a sunny, commanding look in his face! Flaccus? What, is that his name? Yes, that's Flaccus, I suppose. And the other, the one at the corner, what's his name? Septimus, Septimus—what? Septimus Manlius? I don't care about their names, but I should like to know more about that young fellow—he interests me."

"Can you ask your companion to tell you more about him?"

"This is not his house," said the clairvoyante, slowly, after a little pause. "He's a guest here. Why, what is there happening? I can't see them plainly. Every-

thing seems in a muddle. Oh! that's it, is it?—Very well!”

She was silent for a few moments, and the Professor asked —

“Can you tell us what has been happening?”

“*He* is taking me to see the young man at home. We are travelling some little distance. But I don't see anything plainly yet. Oh, this is the country, but I'm not to mind about that. There he is again. This hasn't anything to do with the dinner I saw. It's either a long time after it or a long time before it. That doesn't matter, it's the same young man; Flaccus, yes, that's his name. He's in a garden, and there's a woman with him. She's a handsome woman, too, and oh, isn't she fond of him! How she hangs about his neck! She must be his wife, I suppose, if this is his house. He seems fond of her too. He kisses her and looks happy. But she seems to want him to do something that he won't. Oh, I see! He's going away somewhere, and she wants him to stay. He's saying good-bye. He lifts her right up—how strong he is!—and carries her

over there to a seat under that tree, and just gives her a kiss, while she is in his arms, as if she were a baby, and puts her down, and now he's off. And there she is, crying so, poor thing, as if her heart would break. Oh, I say! He must be hard-hearted for all that he is so handsome and pleasant."

"Where has he gone," asked the Professor presently, as Mrs. Lakesby remained silent, though still with her eyes shut, and plunged more deeply than ever in the ecstatic trance, the reflection of which shone as it were in the eager look of her face.

"I don't know. That picture is passed. *He* says I shall see him again, somewhere else, directly."

Another pause ensued, during which the group round Mrs. Lakesby's sofa remained watchful and spell-bound. The freedom and spontaneity with which the clairvoyante had thrown off her descriptions of the scenes she witnessed had given them a truthful reality for her audience that made the situation impressive for them in the highest degree. The course of their recent experience at Heiligenfels would have

broken down, and swept away distrust or suspicion of a psychological mystery even in witnesses less well-prepared for such phenomena than the party now assembled. As things stood, and practically guaranteed as Mrs. Lakesby's vision was by the previous sanction of the Baron, whose stupendous power on the physical plane of occult science, which they had all seen displayed, had established an almost boundless faith in him generally in all their minds,—no one present had any shadow of distrust of the communications made to them. It was with a thrill of awe, rather than incredulity, that they realised the nature of the current of perception on which she was launched. That her vision was actually recalling scenes enacted in ancient Rome, and bringing back the visible presence of actors who had played a part in them, perhaps nearly two thousand years before, was a conviction, tremendous and astounding though it might be, which was forced upon them irresistibly. They all sat silent and almost motionless, waiting for the next revelation—leaning forward and gazing intently in the dim light at Mrs.

Lakesby's upturned face; while the great expanse of the sky, faintly luminous with the slight moonlight and glittering with the unchanging stars, seemed an emblem of immobility in the midst of change,—of the persistence in nature which the undying pictures in the astral light that the clairvoyante was being enabled to perceive, illustrated in another way.

“It's cool and grand and quiet here—it's a sort of library,” said Mrs. Lakesby. “Oh! there he is again, our friend Flaccus. He's sitting beside an old man, listening to him so intently. I like him better so than any other way I've seen him. I wonder who the old man is. Flam—what? I don't understand. But I like him. That's a beautiful face he has; so grave and serene and good. He puts his hand on Flaccus's head and Flaccus almost kneels down before him. He seems quite to love the young man; and you would never think, to look at him now, that he is the same we saw drinking at the dinner. And yet he shakes his head sadly, and Flaccus seems sorry, very sorry. I wonder what's the matter. He's a great friend of

the old man's, is he? Yes, I can see that for myself. Flam, flamen de — I don't understand.

"Is he the Flamen Dialis?" suggested the Professor.

"That's it; yes, Flamen Dialis," repeated Mrs. Lakesby, the physical organs of articulation catching more readily an unfamiliar word pronounced on the physical plane than on the other, where her higher faculties were moving. "Oh, I see!" she added, after a short pause, "that explains it."

There was something rather tantalising for the modern audience listening to Mrs. Lakesby's physical voice, in the nature of the conversation she was carrying on. Almost continuously, as she was speaking, her words were all addressed to her invisible companion. Of the castle party for whose benefit, really, she was making her astral excursion—she seemed unconscious, except that the questions asked of the Professor at once penetrated her higher faculties as ideas which evoked a response. The nature of the arrangement had now made itself apparent

to her audience; and her last words showed that she had received from her astral companion some explanation of why the Flamen and Flaccus were friends, which satisfied her but remained unreported to them."

"Won't you say what you have heard about the friendship of these two men?" asked the Professor.

"*He* says the Flamen is related to Flaccus, and that Flaccus is almost his pupil in occultism. The Flamen knows a great deal of occult science—is very far advanced indeed—and is doing all he rightly can to induce his nephew to give up his life of pleasure and be altogether an occultist. Flaccus can't do this, but he loves the Flamen and is a great deal with him, and he would like to join him altogether and go with him to a place abroad they are talking about. And Flaccus has got a friend who comes in now; there they are, all three together. The whole thing is getting much plainer to me than it was at first. I seem as if I could answer any questions about them, as I know all about them, and only

have to think of anything about them to get on the track of it."

"What does Flaccus's friend look like?" asked the Professor.

"He's a humble friend, I should say; not a rich powerful man like Flaccus. He's almost poorly dressed, and short and ugly. But he's good. He's got a beautiful aura. By-the-bye, I did not notice that before. I don't so much like the aura round Flaccus. But Flaccus seems to like the little man too. He's quite lame; one foot must have had a bad accident. Oh! now I understand. I seemed to feel it all in flash—almost to see it happening a long time ago. The little man—what? Fa—Fa—what—Fabian is it? Very well. Fabian and Flaccus were friends when they were boys; and Fabian saved Flaccus's life when some building was falling down, by rushing in to him. There must have been a little shock of earthquake. I fancy people were running about frightened, and out into the open air; but Fabian ran in to help Flaccus, and did help him out. Flaccus had been ill, and was in bed. But Fabian got his own foot crushed in the

scramble.” After a little pause. “He’s not a bit sorry for it; he admires Flaccus so, and is almost glad to think he suffered to save him. The Flamen is kind to him; but somehow he seems to like Flaccus best —— What? Oh! that’s it, is it?”

The stream of explanation was again checked, till the Professor set it going once more by asking why the Flamen preferred Flaccus.

“He knows he could if he would be a great student of occult science; and the other couldn’t yet, even if he tried. Besides, the other has suffered so much; he has had such a hard life all round—poor and friendless and ill-used. He’s just a dependant, is he, Fabian, a freed man—very well. Anyhow, he’s so gentle, and kind, and unselfish. He must have his reward first. His turn will come. I wonder how he’s to be rewarded, poor fellow! The Flamen lends him books: that’s what he’s come for now—to get one promised to him; for he’s studying all he can. It’s harder work for him to learn than for Flaccus. What a queer book the Flamen gives him. It isn’t a book; it’s a roll of

paper—a manuscript, I suppose. Very well!”

There was a long pause here. Nothing had been said to afford a clue on which a question could be hung; so the listeners waited patiently in perfect silence. All the while she was speaking, indeed, they were trained in patience, as the sentences did not flow forth in a uniform stream. They would be a good deal spaced out, as it were, by pauses, during which the ideas they afterwards expressed seemed to have been taken in. At last Mrs. Lakesby said—

“There’s Flaccus. Why this is another place. I haven’t been here before. It’s just beside the water—a kind of sea-side place. And Flaccus is standing by the water, near a beautiful big boat. It’s all silk and cushions inside; how nice! Now he’s helping a young woman into the boat; and now he gets in too, after her. Isn’t she a beauty? What a lovely arm! Oh, I say! but this isn’t the other young woman! Flaccus seems to love this one the best. How contented he looks, lying there in the boat with his head in her lap and his arms

round her. No, don't take me away yet. I like to watch them. Enough? No, it isn't nearly enough. I *don't want* to go back—to *that thing* in the distance there. Indeed—I—I—I won't—no, no!"

With confused, vague, and inarticulate protests at the restoration of her absent soul to her body, Mrs. Lakesby subsided for a brief interval into silence, then coughed two or three times and recovered her normal senses—sitting up on the sofa and looking about her for a few moments without speaking.

"That's over, is it not? She has come to herself again," said Mrs. Miller, "has she not?"

"Is your vision quite over," asked the Professor.

"I am trying to fix it," said Mrs. Lakesby, absently. And then, after a while, "Have I been talking to you all the time?"

"Yes; you have been giving us a most profoundly interesting account of all you have seen."

"I lost consciousness on this plane alto-

gether," she said. "What have I told you about?"

"You have been describing ancient Roman times, and telling us about Flaccus and Fabian, and others."

"Ancient Roman times? Oh, ah! now I understand. I never tried to fix it in that way. I was merely conscious of what I saw. Where's the Baron?"

"He has not come back since he went away before you went off in a different manner."

"Isn't it getting a little cold? Let us go in."

They all went into the drawing-room, dazzled for a while by the lamps, after their long sojourn in the partial darkness outside, and moved vaguely about, bewildered by the strangeness of the experience they had been having.

"Who's who?" asked the Professor at length; "can you interpret what you have told us, Mrs. Lakesby?"

"I haven't even thought of it in that light," she said. "It was so interesting. I would like to have seen more. I can re-

member that I did not want to come back, but I was made to."

"Yes; you evidently resisted, and protested aloud; but who was it made you?"

"The companion I was with."

"And who was he?"

"Ah, that's the question. One of them it must have been; a high, powerful one, I suspect."

"One of who?"

"One of those the Baron belongs to. It was one of those"—looking round and speaking especially to Merland—"that I saw in the wood."

"Saw in the wood?" said the Professor; "what do you mean?"

"I saw two figures beside the Baron—figures on the astral plane that the rest of you did not see—when the tree went down. I told Mr. Merland about it at the time."

The Professor gave symptoms of suppressed despair.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Lakesby. It is simply awful that you will bottle up these priceless observations till they come out in this way by the merest accident."

The protest, which was one of a kind the Professor had so frequently had occasion to make before, excited some merriment and restored a more familiar tone to the conversation, so far under the exalting influence, to a certain extent, of the long clairvoyant trance.

"I didn't bottle it up, Professor," said Mrs. Lakesby, pleading for forgiveness; "didn't I mention it to Mr. Merland?"

"But why not to all of us?"

"I remember now. You yourself made us all keep quiet while you explained what was to be done. It was then I saw the two figures."

"Oh, that's capital," cried Mrs. Miller; "I recollect, you ordered us all to hold our tongues. I remember passing on the order to Jem."

"But Merland, my good fellow, why didn't you ——? But no matter." The Professor waived all further discussion of criminality in the case, and merely cross-examined Mrs. Lakesby as to what she had seen.

"Coupled with the fact that one of these

mysterious beings was your spiritual guide this evening, Mrs. Lakesby," he said when the incident had been thoroughly explored, "the whole observation is one of exceedingly great interest. It throws light upon some things the Baron may be not fully at liberty to explain to us himself."

Then the conversation reverted to the scenes of which their clairvoyante had just been a witness. It was clear that the pictures shown to Mrs. Lakesby had not been taken at random from the vast store-house of Nature, to which they belonged. The persons who had passed across them, or some, or at least one of them, must have been former incarnations of some or one of the people then present at Heiligenfels, or of their friends. The leading figure of the visions, Flaccus, was evidently the person to whom their attention should first be turned.

"Who of us feels as if he had been your riotous hero, Mrs. Lakesby, I wonder?" the Professor asked. "If it's you, Blane, you've greatly mended your manners since the old days, at all events."

"I do not think the smallest tie could

connect me with such a magnificent personage as Flaccus," said Blane, meeting the suggestion with the most unequivocal repudiation. "If Mrs. Lakesby introduces us another evening to some entirely insignificant person, with no history whatever in the remote past, I might possibly claim him for my astral ancestor; but Flaccus is certainly not me."

"There are aspects of the character which I could read into my own," said the Professor, with perfect frankness; "but again, other aspects that seem to me quite incompatible."

"Can the heartless reprobate be Jem?" inquired Mrs. Miller.

"As regards good looks," said the Captain, "there might be a something to identify us, but I'm afraid I'm fallen off very much as a *bon vivant*."

"I tell you," said Mrs. Lakesby, "you won't easily match Flaccus for good looks."

"Listen to his latest victim," cried the Professor. "Here's altogether an unexampled case of a lady becoming suddenly attached to a man seventeen or eighteen

centuries older than herself. We, none of us, need despair after this on account of suffering from *anno domini*."

"Is it quite necessary," inquired Blane, "that Flaccus should now be a *man* at all? As I understand the matter, sex is by no means invariable throughout successive incarnations, and does not belong in any true sense to the spiritual individuality at all. Shall we perhaps be right in seeking Flaccus among the ladies whom we know?"

"Goodness!" cried Mrs. Miller, "think of Miss Vaughan for example as Flaccus. She's good-looking enough, at any rate."

"What a very ghastly notion," Merland could not help saying.

"I don't say it is so. I was merely applying Mr. Blane's idea."

"It's a strained hypothesis," said the Professor, "that it seems to me we are not called upon to entertain with more obvious ones before us. For example, we need not necessarily go out of this room in search of our man. How about Merland for the man we are in search of?"

There was silence for a little while, every

one considering the suggestion. Merland had certainly been subdued rather for the last few days, but, on the whole, his was a sunny, joyous, and a social temperament, and, without being extraordinary for physical beauty, he was an exceedingly good-looking young Englishman of a manly and healthful type.

"Very true!" said Blane; "I do not know that Merland is altogether to be congratulated, but certainly there are features in the description that would correspond."

"I don't think," said Captain Miller, "that Flaccus *deserves* to be Merland."

"Jem," said the Professor, thoughtfully, "that's a very sound and sensible remark of yours. We're on the wrong tack in this matter. Flaccus, in his present incarnation, must be paying penalties. We have been looking out for correspondences when we ought to have been in search of contrasts."

It was borne strongly in on Merland's mind, as the Professor spoke, that he was beginning to pay penalties, and that the trouble on which he had just entered was likely to be a very large and comprehensive

penalty. It was a point he could not explain however, and he threw out what he was conscious of as an inadequate suggestion on the subject, though in harmony with the inner working of his thought.

"Flaccus, at all events, if he had been converted into me," he said, "would have fallen a long way from his high estate. It may be that *that* would constitute a penalty."

"It wouldn't do, my dear fellow—it wouldn't do," said the Professor. "We've got a man about whom we know some salient things. Of course I do not make any great fuss about the young lady in the boat. A young Roman noble would not be very straitlaced about such friendships as that, even if he had got a wife at home. But I take it, the lady in the boat is symbolical. She has been shown to us for a purpose. There were probably other ladies yet, if all the truth were known. And the wife at home, you will remember, was left crying bitterly. Flaccus evidently had a great deal on his conscience, or, as it sat very lightly on his conscience while he was

alive, let us say on his Karma, and that has got to be paid for heavily. We should not be doing at all right in looking out for a specially handsome, happy, or prosperous man now, to be himself *redivivus*—quite the contrary, an exactly opposite sort of man is wanted.”

“Annerly!” said Captain Miller.

The suggestion flashed upon them all as a shock, and yet as a revelation.

“Jem, you are inspired this evening,” said Mrs. Miller. “What’s the matter with you?”

The Professor remained with his features rigid for some moments, and on mature examination found the Captain’s idea very good.

“I had worked out the problem as an abstraction,” he said, “but had not applied my own reasoning. You are quite right. If Flaccus is any one of the party lately assembled here, he must be Annerly.”

“Has Annerly,” asked Blane, “been specially unhappy about women, does anybody know?”

“Yes, certainly,” said Merland; “it’s a

matter he does not like talking about, but he has had a great disappointment in that way."

"That's marvellously exact," said the Professor, "and most instructive."

The talk on the subject, for some time, was general and variegated.

"Poor Flaccus!" said Mrs Lakesby. "I'm sure I like Mr. Annerly most cordially, and yet one can see he is not a happy man."

"But still," urged Blane, "there are the grand qualities in the man working on. He has forfeited his handsome appearance and his opportunities of happiness, but in the midst of suffering he is still his higher self. The friend and occult pupil of the Flamen is assuredly the foremost of us all to profit by the opportunities of occult study we have all enjoyed here. I suspect the Baron would recognise the Flamen's pupil in Annerly very clearly."

"It is simply a process of purification," said the Professor, "that he is going through. The Annerly we know may be passing through much suffering, but in connection with transitory things. He has the burden

of a poor physique, but that is for the one life only. He has been denied happiness in love, but who can say if that is not a blessing in disguise? I daresay happiness in love, if the truth were known, is sometimes a curse in disguise. It is easy to understand that Annerly, to-day, may be on a higher rung of the evolutionary ladder than when he was crowned with roses and drinking too much Falernian."

"If Mr. Annerly had known what he was about," said Mrs. Miller, "he wouldn't even have put himself in the way of getting hurt in a love affair. He's bound to be unlucky now, I suppose, in everything of that sort."

"Is there anybody else, I wonder, that we could identify?" said the Professor.

"There was one other person named, if that might be a clue," Blane pointed out; "Flaccus's generous and devoted friend. If the rule of contrasts will apply here, as well as in the other case, we ought to identify him in the person of some one with a very bright and prosperous present."

The same idea may have occurred to more than one of them at the same time, but it

was Mrs. Lakesby who impulsively gave it expression. Merland was standing up, one hand resting on the arm of a sofa on which Mrs. Lakesby had taken a seat. The light of a lamp close by shone full upon his pleasant, good-looking face and tall graceful figure, set off to the best advantage in the evening-dress he wore. Throwing herself round and resting both hands clasped over his upon the arm of the sofa, Mrs. Lakesby looked up in his face with a bright smile, as it were, of recognition, and cried aloud,

“ Fabian ! ”

CHAPTER VII.

A VOICE FROM ABOVE.

AT breakfast next morning the Baron no sooner made his appearance than he was besieged by questions relative to the events of the previous evening; and to the conjectures that had arisen out of them.

“It will perhaps seem rather absurd to you,” he said, in reply to some especially searching inquiry from Mrs. Miller, “but I can’t give you any positive information in the matter. I may be able to help you, indirectly, to some means of forming conclusions, but at least you must dot your *i*’s and cross your *t*’s for yourself. All of us, who are more or less deeply pledged to occult pursuits, become involved in a net-

work of may and may not, the motives of which are not often quite unintelligible to outsiders."

"All right!" said the Professor; "when we know where the wall is set up which bars progress in any particular direction it is easy to act accordingly. But I daresay some general questions may be permissible about the operation of Karmic laws?"

"More than permissible : welcome."

"Very well then. How are we to look at a certain question of probabilities? Take a number of contemporary persons belonging to a very remote period,—say, ancient Roman times,—isn't it a very unlikely thing that they should again be contemporaries at a very much later time? Because the forces which keep them suspended, as it were, in spiritual existence for one or two thousand years, would all have to be exactly equal to drop them down again on earth at the same moment, and that does not recommend itself to the mind as likely."

"But suppose the contemporariness of your hypothetical group the first time was itself not quite a matter of chance? If a

number of human individualities had been drawn together by some tie of association before, the same attractions might assert themselves again? Attractions of that kind even might be a thousand times more potent in the spiritual world indeed, as conducing to a nearly simultaneous reincarnation than on this earth, once the individualities were imprisoned in flesh again."

"Very good. Then it is not to be put aside as an extravagant hypothesis, that several people now living and knowing one another might have lived and known one another before."

"Anything rather than an extravagant hypothesis,—especially when you superadd this consideration: that supposing A, B, and C, were living together at a remote period, A might be so long a time in a spiritual state after that life, as to give B and C, supposing them to have weaker spiritual affinities, time for an intermediate physical life, and for an ultimate second return to earth in company with A."

Letters which were brought in now interrupted the conversation for a while.

"Have you heard from our friend Annerley, this morning?" the Baron inquired presently of Merland, after reading some of his own letters.

"Indeed I have," said the young man. "I've heard the most surprising news I've heard for a long time past."

"It looks as if we should not see him back again at Heiligenfels just at present."

"Why, what's happened?" asked Mrs. Miller.

"I don't know whether to be glad or sorry for his sake," Merland answered; "but I suppose one must be glad for him, because he is so much to himself. He's fallen in with that young lady he was engaged to before, and it's all made up between them again. He's going to be married to her now, in a very short time."

"Hullo!" cried the Professor.

Ejaculations of wonder passed round the table.

"I say," remarked Captain Jem, "there's something got wrong with the laws of Karma."

"Or perhaps with our application of them," said Blane.

"Oh goodness," said Mrs. Lakesby, "have we got to go hunting for Flaccus all over again?"

"Mr. Annerly was such a perfect fit," Mrs. Miller urged. "There may be some mistake. Had you heard about this also, Baron?"

"Yes: that was what made me ask if Mr. Merland had heard."

"Claude," said Mrs. Miller to Merland, "you'd better write to him and warn him not to think of it. It can't turn out for his good."

"I'd like to ask the Baron ——" Blane began, but then checked himself, and added, "No: I beg his pardon. I do not think the inquiry would be justifiable."

A laugh was raised at the caution showed.

"We'd all like to ask the Baron quantities of questions," said the Professor; "that goes without saying."

"I think you are all most wonderfully courteous, discreet, and forbearing," said the Baron.

"We may not be such beasts as we look, Baron," said the Professor, "while we should be worse if we were not careful of the embarrassments you may be placed in by trying to help us."

"At all events," Blane went on, "we may be overrating the necessity—arising out of past circumstances in the life of Flaccus—for supposing that he must be unhappy throughout his present life. He may have worked off his Karma by this time, and be fairly entitled to a free discharge from its effects."

"It's amusing to hear you people talk of your friend's past sins so confidently," said Mrs. Lakesby. "After all, it's only a guess that Mr. Annerly is Flaccus."

"If he's going to be happy, after all," said Mrs. Miller, "I'm sure he can't be Flaccus at all. Remember how he made that poor thing cry."

"Mrs. Miller," protested the Professor, "your otherwise perfect sex will make violent assumptions. First, I would point out that we really do not know why the

lady in the garden was crying. It is quite an assumption that Flaccus was to blame."

"Just like a man's reasoning," said Mrs. Miller; "so mean! But go on."

"Secondly, and what is more important, you assume that because a man says he is going to get married, he must necessarily be going to be happy. That is about the most violent assumption you could indulge in."

"For shame!" cried Mrs. Lakesby, "He's got a chance that way of being happy if he behaves himself."

"Who can tell us anything about the lady?" said Mrs. Miller. "What sort of person is she? Do you know her, Mr. Merland? What's her name?"

"I don't know her," Merland answered, with some hesitation; "and, beyond her name, I can't tell you much about her. Her name is Miriam Seaford."

The Professor was a strong man in all respects, not to be betrayed by a sudden excitement into any display of nervousness. But, with his coffee-cup half way to his lips, he paused, as Merland uttered the words,

and gazed across the table at him, with set and rigid features. He slowly set his cup down again, but did not speak.

“Never heard the name before,” said Mrs. Miller. “Is she well connected?”

“No. I don’t think she’s much what one could call well connected; but there were no bounds to Annerly’s affection for her. It will make quite a new man of him being all right with her again.”

“It seems to cast a bad omen over his nuptials,” Blane said, “to have this feeling about him. Under the circumstances I should say it would be wisest on our part to say nothing to him about our experiences of last night, with all the conjectures arising out of them; that may be quite wrong indeed. I think we should not lose sight of that possibility.”

“Most certainly,” said the Professor; “nothing should be said to Annerly about last night. But I can’t think our conjecture wrong. The correspondences are too close in many ways. The gravest question would be whether——” Just then his eye happened to meet Mrs. Lakesby’s, and he remembered

the little incident that had passed between them some time previously, when he had pressed her to tell him what she had clairvoyantly perceived about him, and when she had said she had seen the astral reflection near him of a woman, whom she named. Mrs. Lakesby evidently remembered the incident too, for she was looking at the Professor rather steadily.

“——’m,” he said, pausing, “it is very difficult to know what to suggest. The circumstances are so peculiar.”

“Fabian ought to know best,” said Mrs. Miller; “at all events he has known his friend a long time. How many thousand years is it?”

“Don’t you feel very much ashamed sometimes, Miss Blane,” said Captain Miller, reflectively, “of all the trouble you women cause in the world, one way and another? Look at poor Flaccus; and he isn’t out of it yet.”

“Who do you call the world, pray?” said Mrs. Miller. “Listen to the selfishness of the tyrants.”

But the Professor, whose good spirits

generally rendered him prompt to take up any light-hearted challenge of this sort, was silent and grave, and the diversion proved a *cul de sac*.

The Professor retained, in the course of the subsequent conversation, his conviction that the identity of the Roman hero had been rightly placed, but the satisfaction of some of the others on this point was not so decided. Merland, especially, did not take, with entire cordiality, to the Fabian idea.

The argument on which it was based—that he represented a good man, enjoying in a very happy estate the fruit of past good deeds—seemed faulty in his judgment. The ladies were inclined to pet him on the strength of his bygone virtues, and this, somehow, rather went against the grain. Still, he was too thoroughly good friends with them all there to be seriously annoyed. He only protested that things were not always what they seemed, and that if they were making him out to be Fabian because of ideas they had formed about what he, Merland, was in actual life, the whole theory

would fall to the ground, supposing them to be wrong in their estimate of him.

“We must wait for further enlightenment,” he urged, and it was generally felt that the whole situation might very desirably be illuminated a little more.

The Baron raised no objection when an inquiry was made of him at dinner whether he thought Mrs. Lakesby would be fit to travel again that evening.

During the day the Professor had taken counsel with no one concerning any special circumstances connected, in his own mind, with the name that had been assigned to Annerly's intended bride. He had been less conversational than usual, and had even gone out in the afternoon for some exercise by himself. The morning he and Blane had spent in compiling a complete record, as far as their memory enabled them to do so, of the descriptions that had been given the preceding evening by Mrs. Lakesby when in her trance; and this had been further amplified by consultation with the other witnesses and by reference to Mrs. Lakesby, who was here and there enabled to fill up

details and give little additional points from her own recollections of what she had seen. The day, in this way, had not been idle or ill-spent, and the sense of exhilaration attaching to the feeling of having thus cleared up the work before him, restored the Professor himself to something like his usual frame of mind in the evening. He was never a man to wear his heart upon his sleeve, and whatever resolutions he formed on the subject of Miss Seaford's engagement, he kept locked up in his own breast.

Only a few words had passed between himself and Mrs. Lakesby in the course of the afternoon on the subject of the name she had once pronounced.

“Do you remember, Mrs. Lakesby,” the Professor had asked, taking an opportunity when he could speak to her unheard by the others, “having once told me that you saw a figure, or an astral reflection of the figure, of a woman near me?”

“I remember,” she answered, “and I remember the name I told you I was impressed by; but I don't know any more, and I don't want to know anything more. Don't

talk to me about it unless you wish me to know more, for you don't know what you may not bring up unintentionally."

The Professor acquiesced in his most straightforward manner.

"I knew she was somehow connected with Mr. Annerly, because I had seen the same figure near him. That puzzled me at the time, and I was going to ask some question about it then ; but it struck me as being no business of mine so I let the matter alone."

The Professor was quite willing to let the matter drop, so nothing more was said about it; and he was rather relieved than otherwise at finding that Mrs. Lakesby did not desire to pursue the topic. So the day passed, and in the evening at dinner the inquiry was made as to whether the clairvoyante would probably be fit for travel.

"I should have thought," said the lady herself, "that Mrs. Lakesby might have been consulted on the point"—she had a trick in this way of referring to herself by name in the third person. But there was no acrimony in her objection, for all the party at the castle were her devoted admirers and

enthusiastic friends, and she fully recognised this.

"We wouldn't have you go on any account, dear Agatha," said Mrs. Miller, "unless we were sure it was good and safe for you."

"Safe for me! Why, I'm wandering about somewhere, I can tell you, many more nights than I stay quietly at home in bed. And other people wander too, sometimes, who don't remember it afterwards."

"Any one among us, do you mean?" asked Blane, who was sitting next to her.

"Yes." She laughed a little, and was half reluctant to make her statement more explicit. "There's nothing in it, really."

"Perhaps not," said the Professor, soothingly; "but we take an interest sometimes, even in things that may be nothing to you."

"Oh! now, I'm sure you'll scold me again for not telling you sooner. How silly of me to mention it at all."

"I call all here to witness that I am the meanest and humblest of your subjects. I could no more presume to find fault ——"

"Well then, it was you I've seen out of the body at night, two or three times."

"Me!"

"You were fast asleep in the astral body, as much as in the physical body at the time, I suppose; but you were as real to me one way as the other."

"But where did you see me? I don't understand now."

"In my room, of course. I woke up, feeling there was something near me, and there you were, standing dazed and fast asleep by the stove. You'd come floating in through the wall, in a most unbusiness-like manner; for you went back that way when I put my will against you, instead of out of the window naturally—like any one used to going about in the astral."

"But this is really most extraordinary," said the Professor. "My dear Mrs. Lakesby, how is it possible that you should have noticed this and ——"

"There! I call all here to witness if I'm not being scolded again."

"—— and have so graciously and kindly remembered to tell us," said the Professor,

giving his sentence a different turn from that first intended. "We thank your Majesty most humbly and gratefully. But if only at the time you had seen fit to wake me, in the astral body, so that I might have had the invaluable experience of finding myself conscious in that condition, my gratitude, personally, would have been even greater."

"I wouldn't have done that for the world. You might have been unable to get back again, and I couldn't have helped you. You might never have got back at all."

"The whole subject is so mysterious that I can't give an opinion, of course; but I authorise you most completely to run any risk there may be another time, and wake me up if you can."

Mrs. Lakesby declined to undertake any such commission, and the Baron, appealed to, was rather of opinion that she exercised a wise discretion in the matter. After a good deal of miscellaneous conversation on the subject of such unconscious wandering away from the body by the people who were not clairvoyant, in the proper sense of the

word, the original question came to the surface again. It was somewhat cooler that evening than it had been the last, and the Baron thought it quite unnecessary that they should sit out on the terrace. It would be all the better, indeed, for Mrs. Lakesby that she should remain indoors. If she were not disturbed by too great a glare of light in her face—that was all that mattered. It was arranged that they should sit that evening in the drawing-room.

“But there isn’t any sort of hurry,” Mrs. Lakesby urged; “you can all go and have your cigars and coffee at leisure. In an hour is time enough for us to begin.”

“Cigars and coffee!” said Blane. “How can we think of contemptible creature-comforts in the midst of the experiences we are having here. I’m sure, in the future, when we look back on this ever-to-be-memorable visit, we shall despise ourselves for having stooped even to spend time in eating or sleep.”

“But since we have been eating,” said Mrs. Lakesby, “I think I’d rather wait a

little first before I go to ancient Rome again."

"There's good sense in that, I'm sure," said Captain Miller; "particularly considering the stupendous dinner you've been having."

Mrs. Lakesby's habits at table were of the very soberest and simplest, as she ate but very slightly of the plainest food, and never drank wine, so the Captain's little joke required no comment, and the gentlemen went upstairs to the smoking-room. Then, towards the latter end of the evening, the Baron went on to his own turret chamber, sending messages of farewell to the ladies, and then the Professor and the rest descended to the drawing-room with a few very simple instructions as to how they were to proceed. Mrs. Lakesby was to be made comfortable on a sofa, and warmly covered up. That was all that mattered. The light was to be subdued, and then they could wait to see what happened.

A very short time elapsed after these arrangements were made when Mrs. Lakesby, who showed no inclination that evening

to tease the rest by making fun of the situation, betrayed to the now experienced observation of her friends that her attention was attracted by some abnormal appearance. Her large eyes were fixed steadily on a picture hanging against the wall she faced, and the others instinctively watched it too.

"That's odd," said Mrs. Lakesby. "I'm not gone away in the least. No one has come to fetch me—but still I'm beginning to see things."

"What sort of things?"

"A kind of a room, with books about, and an old man reading. I seem to feel as if the room were not strange, but I don't know where it is."

"Does this hinge on to what you saw last night—is the room like the Flamen's library?"

"Good gracious, no! not in the least. This is quite a modern sort of a room—though a bit old-fashioned; and the books are printed books like ours. What's the old man got to do with us, I wonder? It's no time ago at all, to speak of, I'm sure—only a few years. The old man has got a

dressing-gown on, and a velvet cap, and slippers. Now he looks up, and I can see his face. How very old he is to be sure—a hundred at least. Ah! now I begin to understand a little more. Some one is showing me signs to explain who the old man is. I wonder who it is doing this! I can't see any one but the old man."

"What do you mean by signs?"

The Professor had, as before, taken up the *rôle* of questioner.

"I see cabalistic signs over his head. He is a great student of the occult sciences—the old man is evidently. Now he is showing me books that the old man has written—three, four, five of them. I wish I knew who it was doing this."

Then she laughed a little.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Why he made the leaves of one of the books flutter over and they are all blank. I suppose he means there is not much to be learned from them. But now he shows a crown for a moment over the old man's head. What does that mean?"

“What a singular way of conveying information.”

“Now the old man leans his head forward on his arms over the table. Is he asleep or dying? All the books and the room are fading away; but I still see the old man’s figure—all sunk together somehow. I’m sure it means that he is dead. There’s the crown still hovering over him, brighter than ever. Goodness! how strange. Now it’s all gone.”

The clairvoyante looked round at her companions, still quite in possession of her usual faculties.

“What does all that mean?” she said, wondering. “Just as the old man’s figure grew indistinct the crown seemed to settle down on him for a moment; and through it, as it were, there floated up the small figure of a child, that floated right up and disappeared.”

“That’s a highly symbolical vision,” remarked Blane, “with a great deal of meaning, I suspect. It clearly emphasises the rebirth of the old man; but the bare idea of such a rebirth is not new to us. It

evidently means that there is something very special attaching to the rebirth of the old man. But we don't know who he is. Are we intended to find an identity for him amongst some of the people we know?"

"There is no clue, that I can see," said the Professor. "An old man who has been a student of the occult science, and is born again, is not much to go by. We have no hint about his character."

The problem was discussed in its various bearings for some time without leading to any very definite result, and, the conversation having become general, no one noticed that Mrs. Lakesby had leaned back again on her sofa, in the position in which she had first been established, and from which she had sat up to look at her vision. Suddenly interrupting Mrs. Miller, who was speaking at the moment, she said, in a full, loud voice, though in rather deeper tones than she generally used,

"Listen!"

The injunction silenced the conversation, and with a thrill of interest they all looked at their clairvoyante, who again presented

the appearance of the previous evening, and lay with her eyes closed, apparently in a deep sleep. The authoritative command to "listen" set them straining their ears to catch some distant sound or voice, but in a few seconds Mrs. Lakesby spoke again, still in the somewhat unusual voice in which she had begun.

"There are two among you here who may do good service, if they will, to their fellow-men, and to the cause of truth, and the spread of that knowledge which the world needs so urgently to save it from spiritual death ——"

Captain Miller, who had quietly provided himself with paper and pencil to take notes of the descriptions Mrs. Lakesby had been expected to give, began to scribble a record of the strange speech thus commenced. It was spoken so slowly and emphatically that he was able to take down its sense completely, and almost the exact words.

"Only if they were,—what they are not,—would they be able fully to realise why they have been chosen to have this opportunity of doing a grand work; for in

their hearts they may know of failings that will seem to disqualify them to some extent from playing the part now offered to them, in awakening other men, better qualified by purity of life and spirituality of nature, as the world judges such things, to enter on the life of sacrifice, and self-denial, and suffering, which leads to the only triumph that is real, and the only reward that wise men should care for, and the only happiness that is not illusory. It is the law of Karma which you are all trying to comprehend, which invests them with the privilege of holding up the lamp to show their companions the right path amidst the obscurities of physical knowledge, amidst the entanglements of the unreal and the transitory impressions of sense. One of those of whom I especially speak—for all here present, in varying degrees, may take a part in the work to be done—will shortly have to undergo some humiliations in the sight of the world. It is a penalty he will have to pay for indulgences that have been enjoyed and laws of the physical life that he has set at naught. But no pictures that can be shown

to this woman, will explain the nature of the Karma, which gives him the right to emerge, if he will, from the slough of lower affinities on to the higher plane of existence to which he partly belongs, by helping others to reach that plane with him. He says he is curious to know the facts of his bygone personal history. Some he may be enabled to collect, but the most important are those which have to do with his own intellectual growth, which no outward facts he may now look back upon, will illuminate. For several incarnations in the past his spiritual aspirations, borne downward by worldly ambitions, have masked themselves in intellectual growth. For remember, that what you call great mental faculties are faculties of spirit deeply buried in matter disguised in their application, in their almost exclusive application to the purposes of the most unreal, that is to say the most evanescent, plane of natural manifestation,—that which to the blinded eyesight of the flesh appears the only one. This man's Ego may be likened to one of your rivers which bore their way underground, and which sometimes fail alto-

gether to re-emerge into the light of day in one complete stream,—but streams like these may burst forth afresh altogether in the sunlight. The humiliation in store for him that I spoke of just now may be likened to the turbid impurities of a torrent breaking from the mountains, that may settle and leave the stream clear as it proceeds. But, dropping the metaphor, his own spiritual future will depend upon the spirit in which he meets this crisis in his life, and on the use he makes of the great opportunity now within his reach. Some suffering there must be,—there must always be suffering where there has been wrong, where there has been ignorance, where there has been selfishness, where there has been effort made to gather in and jealously consume happiness, instead of effort to expand and pour it out for the good of others;—but suffering of that sort is only to be conquered by endurance: the law of Karma may be hard to study, but it is still harder to cheat.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERIES OF KARMA.

SPELL-BOUND, though in a very different way from that of the previous evening, the audience round the sofa listened with rapt attention, and with a strange sense of awe. For, though the lips that spoke the words they heard were those of their familiar friend, the whole style and flavour of the address was so utterly unlike her own mode of expression that the perception of a different personality speaking in some way through her, was borne in on their minds quite irresistibly. The previous evening her own phrases and idioms had been preserved all the while. It had been Mrs. Lakesby speaking, though Mrs. Lakesby in a clairvoyante trance. But now there

was no Mrs. Lakesby left in the case at all, except as far as the body which lay on the sofa was concerned. The soul animating it had apparently been quite metamorphosed. And this change had a singularly weird effect.

She had paused for some half-minute after the words last set down. Then she went on, perfect silence having been maintained in the interval by her listeners :

“ I do not beat about the bush in saying this, for the man is strong and able to hear truth, though hitherto in more than one incarnation he has been using that strength to command others rather than to school himself. As this woman said last night, those he has spoken to, have known what they had to do ; but he has forgotten to speak to himself, so he has not known. And there is another man among you who has let opportunities pass by him more than once before this time, and has stood by dreaming while they floated out of his reach. Will he seize this one ? Blane, my friend, you have never seriously sinned against any human being but yourself, but this is not

the first time I have come to you, though it may be the first time you can at this moment remember, and I have found you always fit but never ready. But good Karma is patient, and it waits for you still, but it can only give you chances. Command over others has as little attraction for you now as the last time, when you dreamed away one physical existence in the blameless negation of a monastery, or as when before then, in the vortex of that physical life which has so many correspondences with this in which you all are now immersed, you lived amidst the pitch and were not defiled. But one may even be too fastidious in regard to defilement down in that seething cauldron of life you call the world. Fix your will upon the essence and not the show of things, and do not fear to stand beside whatsoever can truly serve humanity, which is your cause, and mine, and that of all of us, even though you seem to share the stains upon his hands and garments. The stream of your intellectual growth has never gone underground; its spiritual quality is scarcely masked at all, or only so far as may be

necessary for its expression on that plane of existence, but there has come a time when it should no longer run to waste.

“I have nearly done; for I must do no more than hint, suggest, awaken thought, and leave with you all in your several degrees the duty of action, the choice of means. The genius of your age is boring down when it might soar upward; it is wearing itself out against the hard rock when it might expand into splendid growths of a superior race, if its forces were trained into the right direction. Many efforts are being made to guide its evolution into the true path of progress. The sooner this is done the better for individuals concerned, even though the final result must come about sooner or later—the sooner, then the less suffering. For ignorance of nature is the source of all suffering, and there is no ignorance so fatal, so disastrous, as knowledge of only one side. Work to obliterate that ignorance. Struggle, and if necessary suffer, to minimise suffering; and learn to apply the most occult truth of all enshrouded in that occult science which fascinates so many minds, which it fails to penetrate,—

that the highest knowledge must be sought in the highest self-abnegation, in the highest spiritual philanthropy.

“ And now, since I see that the very faithful pencil of my good secretary yonder has fairly well recorded this poor homily of mine. I will ask him to bring his notes over, and put them under this woman’s hand a moment, and I will affix my mark, which at any rate will have some meaning for your friend the Baron, and may usefully be known by you, —so long as you take care not to let that little morsel of phantasmagorial knowledge on the physical plane, grow useless by too wide a dissemination.”

Just as neither the Professor nor Blane, when they had been especially addressed during this strange speech, had uttered any words in reply, so Captain Miller took the reference to himself in silence; but as soon as he had finished writing the last words he brought the last piece of the paper on which he had been writing, and stood, rather uncertain how to act, beside the sofa, on which Mrs. Lakesby lay still in a profound trance. Blane hastily got a book, to put under the

paper for her to write upon, and Captain Miller tried to put the pencil between her fingers, as they lay upon the rug which had been thrown over her body. With a vague and awkward movement she pushed this aside, and let her hand fall open on the paper. It rested there for a few moments, and then, as she drew it away, they all saw that a peculiar hieroglyphic or monogram, as though written with blue pencil, had appeared on the spot her hand had covered.

She drew her hand slowly up to her face, and rubbed it across her eyes and forehead, then rolled her head on the pillow from side to side; and then, turning over on her side altogether, was troubled with a short fit of coughing, out of which she emerged her own usual self, remarking that it was too bad, altogether.

“What is too bad, dear?” asked Mrs. Miller, kneeling down beside her with the kind of adoring impulse so apt to assert itself among beholders towards a person in whom psychic gifts of a high order exhibit themselves.

“To be hustled off like that in the middle

of watching them at play. What's the use of taking me all that way if I'm not to stop and see something?"

Her remarks were so up in the air and unconnected with what had been going on that Blane and the Professor could only look at one another in bewilderment.

"My dearest Agatha," said Mrs. Miller, "what on earth do you mean?"

"Why, Flaccus and his friends were having a game at ball together. It was such fun to see them. Didn't I tell you about that?"

"Why no, of course not; you have simply been speaking to us or some one else ——"

"Pardon me for interrupting you," said the Professor, "but we can tell Mrs. Lakesby all she said afterwards. First let us hear what she now remembers. It is most important to secure all that before it escapes from her recollection."

"I simply was called by the same one that took me away last night, and was getting some more visions of the same sort. I never thought of you, of course, at the time, but didn't I talk to you about them

like last night? Didn't you ask me questions?"

"Your faculties have been duplicated in some extraordinary manner," said the Professor; "we will tell you all about that directly, but meanwhile do please now go over all you saw. What did you see first?"

"I saw that old man of the chair, that you said to-day must have been a Consul. He was standing in the midst of a large party of people, women as well as men, all handsomely dressed, and he was talking to one of the women, a young woman, quite a girl, paying her compliments and making her laugh, and yet I could see by his aura that he was sad and angry at heart. I have got a notion that the young woman was a bride and that the party was a marriage-party. Then a young man joined them and treated the Consul in a very deferential manner, but drew away the woman after a little while, and then the vision faded, and I saw a number of young men, with very little on, playing ball in a big, empty room. There was Flaccus among the number, and he seemed to be enjoying himself greatly; but,

just as I was beginning to ask who the others were, my companion hustled me away without ceremony, merely saying, I remember, 'Can't stop any longer now. Master's going.' What on earth did he mean by 'Master's going'?"

At another time, perhaps—since the Professor had been so plainly identified, in the mysterious speech that had just been delivered, with the Consul of Mrs. Lakesby's Roman visions—there might have been some disposition among his friends to banter him about having been given, even in his former incarnation, to paying compliments to the ladies. This was a trait of his modern character asserting itself in a former life as well. But the solemnity of the address they had received left its impression on their feelings, and the opening for badinage was disregarded.†

The course of events, as regarded her own trance, was related to Mrs. Lakesby, and the Captain's record of the words that had issued from her lips was read over to her. Of these she retained no trace of recollection whatever.

“How should she?” the Professor pointed out. “It is all intelligible enough now. We are familiar with the fact that her own soul leaves her body altogether under such circumstances as we have had to-night, and what has evidently occurred has been this: While her soul was far away in the custody of one of the extraordinary beings who are interesting themselves in our proceedings just now, her body was made the vehicle of an address to us from some other of them. His identity, even, will be apparent to the Baron, when we describe what has taken place, for we have got his signature.”

“I wonder, is anything more going to happen to-night?” inquired Captain Miller.

“What we have had has not taken long,” Blane remarked, “but it has been very suggestive.”

“Very!” said the Professor, who began to walk up and down the room, profoundly revolving the situation in his own mind. “The smallest of these visions, I am persuaded, is thrown in our way with a purpose. Even so little a thing as that last about Flaccus in the sphæristerium ——”

"In the what?" asked Mrs. Lakesby.

"You see the living reality, dear lady, and call it playing at ball. Dusty scholars find it a long name, but the same thing is meant. The parting glimpse of him afforded to us emphasises the physical importance of the Karma he engendered during his Roman time, and that we know, with Annerly, has produced very decisive effects on his present incarnation. In my own case, physical Karma does not seem to have been specially operative. The Consul was an ordinary sort of man, apparently, in physique, and I am an ordinary sort of man. But there are points in what we have heard that to me are very suggestive."

"Oh, I was nearly forgetting," said Mrs. Lakesby; "it suddenly comes back to me."

"What was that?" asked the Professor, keenly.

"It was not about you—it was Fabian."

"Oh, I do trust, Mrs. Lakesby," cried Merland, "that you saw Fabian, this time, at some good, downright mischief. I assure you you will not link him with my personality unless you did."

"Fabian," said Mrs. Lakesby, sitting up and looking at him earnestly, "you were not at any kind of mischief I assure you. Dear me, how vividly I remember it again now, though it was only just a picture."

"Oh, what was it?" said Mrs. Miller, as the clairvoyante paused.

"Poor Fabian!" Blane said. "Has he been detected in some new good deeds? I can understand that. Merland's delicacy of feeling is now rather put to the blush, but, at the same time, others of us will wish we had half his complaint."

"He was sitting by a girl's bedside reading to her or telling her something out of a book on his knees. But she was not a beautiful girl at all, almost a child, and very plain and withered-looking, very ill evidently. Fabian was holding her hand and talking to her; and she was looking at him so wistfully in spite of her ugliness and illness, the *thought* of her was quite beautiful. Her aura was so clear and good. But the room was a poor room; it was a miserable sort of scene altogether."

"Well, at all events," said Merland, "it's

a mercy my patient was a girl. There seems a shade less of goodi-goodiness in my proceedings that way—if you will have it that it was I,—which I cannot feel to be the case at all.”

“It’s better to have been doing good among your fellow-creatures, anyhow,” said Blane, “than to have been a useless fool of a monk.”

“Now, do not let us contemplate any of these problems,” the Professor urged, “with personal feelings. They are all given to us for the sake of the knowledge they convey. And do you observe,” he went on, addressing the company generally, as he continued to walk about the room, “what a large part in Karma is evidently played in all our cases—in all except Blane’s case, as far as we know it, yet—by our relations with women. What a determining force that seems to be.”

“In a negative way my case bears out what you say,” put in Blane, “for my Karma does not seem to have had much to do with women; while, also, with the colourless and useless life I have led ——”

There was a general outbreak of laughter at this; the last words were uttered with so much grim sincerity, while the feeling all his friends entertained towards Blane was one of such strong affection, that there seemed something absurd in the abuse he was levelling against the nature of his own life.

“ ——— What are you laughing at?”

“My dear Willy,” said Mrs. Miller, who gave Blane brevet-rank as her cousin occasionally, “if there is such a thing as a universal favourite, who is not entitled to talk in a misanthropical way ———”

“I am not misanthropical; I am merely recording facts. I may be a fool for my pains, perhaps, but as a fact women have not been the main interest of my life; of course I do not assert that it has had any main interest——” this provoked a reversal of friendly jeers, but Blane got to the end of his explanation none the less——“and it would seem that I am the only person whose Karma has not been associated with women, as far as we know.”

“Blane’s argument,” said the Professor,

“is perfectly sound and important. Let us be serious about all this. It is far too interesting for chaff.”

“But seriously,” said Merland, “there are flaws in the argument which associate Fabian’s personality with mine. I won’t be affected about the matter, but will speak of it as if a third person were concerned. I am represented as having been a very good person in my last incarnation, and therefore as now being very fortunately circumstanced; and no doubt you assume that happy destinies are awaiting me in connection with women to match my reputed merit in regard to the sick child and so forth. Now I would not make the statement I am going to make if it were not for the importance of our studies in this matter, but you must believe me when I assure you that all conjectures of that sort will necessarily prove wrong. I would rather not go into details; but I assure you that my future, though fair in some of its aspects, does not lie before me as likely to be a happy one at all, and most assuredly it will not be made happy by any woman. If my fixed determination can control it it

will be altogether concerned with a life-long devotion to occult science."

"Well," said the Professor, after a little interval, "no one should be called upon to lay bare, even for an analysis of this sort, incidents in his life which are of quite a private nature. But I confess for me the Fabian hypothesis is one I cannot reject in spite of what you say. Its incongruities may somehow explain themselves *la r.* An entire stranger would not understand our position in this business at all. But we have all been led from one thing to another; and I feel just as sure that these visions of Mrs. Lakesby are regulated by some very powerful beings, with a definite purpose, as that she is not merely inventing them as she goes along, as any self-confident outsider, knowing nothing of our surroundings, might suggest. We have been told something now about four distinct lines of Karma, and three of them at all events—I think all four—are borne in on the understanding as harmonious with the obvious interpretations."

"But do you not forget," said Merland,

“what we heard this morning about Annerly?”

“I do not forget that at all, but I trust to the Karmic indication more than to the appearance of his present engagement. I am sorry to feel that this engagement is not likely to turn out for his happiness or welfare.”

The conversation was prolonged, on these lines, till a late hour, but no further manifestations of clairvoyance took place that night.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PROFESSOR IN TROUBLE.

AMONG the letters which arrived at the castle the following morning was a long-shaped packet for the Professor, in a blue envelope, addressed in a formal hand. He looked over its contents standing by the window, while those of the company who had already assembled were gathered in another part of the room, and, putting it away in his pocket, joined them for breakfast, and talked and joked in his usual manner. After breakfast, however, he sought a private conversation with the Baron, and, going with him into the library, announced that he had received news that morning which he thought it his duty to communicate to the Baron, as his host at Heiligenfels, without delay.

“Lady Emily Massilton,” he said, “has

instituted proceedings against me for divorce. Lady Emily, in fact, must have been conducting her proceedings, while still of the preparatory order, from under this roof; which appears to me to have been a departure from good taste—but that is a detail. First of all, does this information take you very much by surprise?”

“It gives me, perhaps,” said the Baron, “more pain than surprise. I believed that something of the kind would have to be gone through.”

“Of course you mean that by some occult channel of knowledge you got that impression?”

“Quite so.”

“Well, about the case on its merits I shall be very glad to talk to you at length; but the duty before me for the moment appears clear. Once formally commenced, I suppose the fact that this suit has been set on foot may become public property any day. The society papers may be announcing it as we speak. It will be possible that people will form judgments in the matter unfavourable to me, and it may be embarrassing for you

and your friends that I should be your guest any longer under these circumstances ; and, deeply as I regret having to abandon the inquiries on which we are engaged, I propose to leave this house at once."

"Who of the party here, do you think, would resent your further stay ?"

"First of all, the person best entitled to do so would be yourself."

"My dear Professor, though I have latterly been a visitor to your world, I am not of it. My judgments of men are not much governed by externals. To be quite candid, I dare say there has been much in your conduct—assuming that the attack now made upon you has some ground to go upon—that I should disapprove of ; but that which is a shadow or a dream to others is a reality to me, and *vice versa*. There is that in your Karma, I know, which entitles you and enables you to do great good in the world, by helping to disseminate knowledge, for which your own mind has been attuned. It has been my duty to arm you with the means of doing this. Personally, I deplore the bad Karma which, in your case, is

mingled with the good ; but that does not dispose me to throw aside my own task when it is but half done. Individually, as far as I am concerned, I would ask you to stay."

"I am glad to hear you say that, but it does not affect my view of the matter. Individually you may feel that, but, as regards others, I understand you to mean different feelings will prevail?"

That this might be the case the Baron could not deny. He asked for no confidence, but the Professor volunteered some in the course of their conversation—partly, as he explained, because he wanted the Baron's counsel on a matter connected indirectly with his own affairs. That the proceedings set on foot against him would turn partly upon certain adventures of his which, of course, he would not attempt to justify, was evident already, and the lady concerned with those adventures was the lady to whom Annerly had now engaged himself to be married. What was the Professor to do under these trying circumstances?

"Whether," he said, "it will excuse my

conduct in your eyes to know that my own marriage has long proved a mere loveless mockery of a marriage, I do not know. That, of course, is my justification before my own conscience. I have legal liabilities, but no moral responsibilities in my own sight, towards Lady Emily."

"But how about the other lady?"

The Professor showed more emotion than he had yet betrayed; but after a brief pause he stated the case with his usual incisive vigour.

"I fell into temptation, and I succumbed. I truly loved Miriam Seaford. I would never have deserted her. I would have looked upon her as my real wife to the end. But I deceived her in one way—she did not know I was actually married. She was a strange creature—a mixture of passion and ambition. For conventional morals she cared nothing—for a place in society she cared a great deal; and when she realised that this was impossible of attainment through me, she left me."

"I am the worst adviser you could choose in such a matter. My life has been passed

beyond the reach of the frenzied passions you refer to. It appears to me that Annerly should not be suffered to take any irrevocable step in ignorance of important facts bearing on it. But you must act in this matter on your own discretion, if you act at all."

"Of course," said the Professor, turning the subject shortly afterwards, "I need hardly say that my visit here has been a revelation. It has opened my eyes to new worlds. It will be no fault of mine, but my misfortune alone, if circumstances now thrust me outside the area of your work."

"I hope nothing of that kind need take place. In trying to bring you within that area I have not acted without the approval of those in whose wisdom I trust implicitly. Every attempt of this kind is liable to failure, but I should imagine that the higher part of your nature may assert itself after these trials are past, and triumph over the lower."

Some further talk ensued, and then before they separated the Baron asked that he might be relieved if possible of the duty of making explanations to their friends after the Professor had gone.

“Would you be reluctant to put your case, as far as our friends here are concerned, in Captain Miller’s hands?”

“Captain Miller! Well, I’d rather have spoken to Blane. Captain Miller and I have been least intimate perhaps of any couple of people here.”

“Captain Miller’s nature seems to me true gold. You may not find him a specially lenient critic of any conduct you admit to be faulty; but Blane should, I think, be left to act in this matter in accordance with very deliberate thought. It is very important how he acts, and I hope he will resolve, for the sake of higher interests, to stand side by side with you as a witness to the truth—no matter how you are, for the moment, discredited before the world.”

“Good Heavens!” said the Professor, “then *I* was the person Blane was warned not to shrink from, by the voice last night?”

Though he had been frank in acknowledging that blame might attach to him in connection with the disclosures that were threatened, the Professor experienced a shock at the notion that he would be smirched

in this way to an extent that might render other men averse from being publicly associated with him. He and Blane had been laying many plans for joint action in literature and society for the purpose of spreading a comprehension of the new truths,—new as regarded their fellow-countrymen, their age and generation,—that had possessed their own minds. The Professor's notion in preparing to leave the castle at once had arisen rather from the thought that the ladies might consider themselves injured by his continued presence under the circumstances, than from apprehension that the morals of the men might be shocked.

“I should hope that Blane would hardly be disposed to throw my friendship over about this affair?” he said.

“You can't hope that more than I; but Blane must act deliberately, and not be caught in any hurried declaration of sympathy, before he understands what he is about. Believe me that will be best.”

“I am not used, Baron,” said the Professor, “to being guided by any other man's judgment, but yours is ——”

“Worth very little in such a matter, and I do not ask you to go by it. It is rather a request that I make than an advice that I venture to tender.”

“Either way will do for me.”

When the Professor returned to the dining-hall, where they had breakfasted, he electrified Mrs. Miller with amazement, by announcing his immediate departure.

“Urgent private affairs, dear lady; you can’t realise—or rather after all that has passed you can’t fail to realise—how greatly I regret having to leave you just now. I saw that I must go when I read my letters this morning; but I thought I owed it to the Baron to explain some of my reasons. These have to do with business, and I won’t trouble you ladies with them.”

“Nothing of a disagreeable nature I hope,” said Mrs. Lakesby, who was still present, some of the others having already dispersed.

The Professor turned upon her a sharp inquiring look.

“I am almost tempted to ask you whether it is likely to end disagreeably?”

Mrs. Lakesby laughed. "I was not thinking of clairvoyant impressions, and I don't want to be a fortune-teller."

"But would you answer me a simple question, even though it seemed an odd one?"

"That depends on the question."

The Professor turned to Mrs. Miller. "Will you let me consult the oracle in your little room—I will not keep her five minutes?"

Mrs. Miller, curious, but not surprised, of course acquiesced. When the Professor and Mrs. Lakesby were together he took a small locket from his pocket.

"You will remember asking me if I had a lock of hair of that lady we spoke of. I have since then written home for a certain locket which I knew to contain it, and here it is. Now I want no longer to know where the lady is, but it would throw light upon some duties which lie before me if I knew the state of that lady's feelings in regard to myself. Can you give me a clue to them?"

As he spoke, he unfastened a small locket, and offered the piece of hair it contained

to Mrs. Lakesby. She took it doubtfully and reluctantly.

“It is an odd question for a married man like you to be asking,” she said.

“No doubt. If it is necessary you shall have full explanations as to why I ask it—you will know shortly in any case; but it would be more interesting to me if you would answer my question without inquiring further for the moment.”

“I have an impression,” said Mrs. Lakesby, thoughtfully, as she fingered the hair, “that I am treading on very delicate ground. And nothing can be more uncertain than such ideas as this.” She spoke, pausing between the sentences, but the Professor waited patiently, and she sat down, still holding the hair and knitting her brows. “You had better not act on any thing I say. Oh! I see a small room, like a little drawing-room, and the same woman sitting at a little desk in front of the window. She’s looking over letters; she’s in some sort of trouble and perplexity. Ah! Here, take back the hair. I don’t feel as if this sort of thing was right.”

"But cannot you give me the clue I want? I am not seeking it for any bad motive, I assure you. A glimpse of the truth clear of all superficial deceptions would be invaluable to me, and might enable me to redress past mistakes."

"And suppose I make new mistakes? This sort of vision is the most uncertain thing."

"It is too late to ask me to distrust your vision. If you won't tell me, you won't; but for want of knowing the truth I may be enveloped, and others too, in sad misunderstanding."

"You will check what I tell you in other ways? You won't trust to it blindly?"

"Certainly not. It is a clue—a guiding thread in a labyrinth—that I require."

"I don't know how you are mixed up with that woman's affairs, but I should say—I should think that she loves you."

"Thanks, most sincerely. I shall know better what to do now, and may perhaps be able to avert much unhappiness."

"I hope I have not contributed to produce any?"

“That is impossible. Darkness and misunderstandings produce unhappiness, not light and truth-telling.”

There was no thought of further occult work that evening at the castle. When Captain Jem, very grave and disturbed, came back from seeing off the Professor at the station, he reported the whole situation to Mrs. Miller, and she told the other ladies in separate confabulations. The Captain told Merland and Blane, and everybody knew all about the situation of affairs by dinner-time. At first discussed in shy allusions, by degrees the moral problems involved came to be more openly debated. The presence of the German servants was no embarrassment.

“Well,” said Mrs. Miller, at length giving an opinion that was the first put forward explicitly, “I dare say he’s been behaving very badly to the other woman; but Lady Emily’s a cold-hearted cat, and I suspect she drove him to it.”

“I should never attempt,” Blane said, “to form an opinion about the morality of any other man’s actions; and, as for married

people, every married couple is an insoluble enigma for all outsiders. But I am deeply sorry this thing has occurred, for the sake of the work we were to have done together."

"He is very anxious about that," said the Captain; "he's hard hit in his pride, is our Professor, to think that his name may be a burden to carry, instead of a tower of strength, for any man he works with."

"We have got," Blane answered, "far enough into occultism in the course of this visit to feel that, in anything said to the world on the subject, a very elevated moral tone must be preserved. If the exponents of such teaching as we have to offer, are open to reproach of a very common-place kind, the world will have an easy retort to fling at us."

"The difficulty," said the Baron, "is always to unite perfect reprobation of sin with perfect charity towards the sinner."

"Of course," said Mrs. Miller, "it is a pity, a horrible pity, that we should be hampered in anything we have to put forward about occultism with an objectionable scandal of this sort."

"I am very far," replied the Baron, "from

saying that it is a good thing we should be so hampered. But I can just imagine that some tasks should not be made too easy in the beginning. Some men and some ideas must be tried in the fire before they are ready for what they have to do."

"Isn't it rather soon for our new movement to be put through ordeals before it is fairly started even?"

"It may be the people associated with it, who are to go through the ordeals before even the movement begins. But, after all, that is a recondite hypothesis. The practical way to consider the thing seems to me this, that we should always look at the good points of the people we find ourselves thrown with as co-workers, if they certainly have good points, and put up with, or not think about, their failings."

"Baron!" said Blane, "the thing I am feeling chiefly, if you will allow me to say so, is that an outrage is offered, as it were, to your name, which is so profoundly respected by all who know you, that it should not be associated, at this crisis, with any other, tarnished by the breath of scandal."

“My dear friend, my poor name is of no consequence at all. I would gladly, if that were possible, come back amongst you in London next year to let it be of what service it might be to you in any work you try to undertake, for the sake of truth and humanity, but that unfortunately must not be.”

This was not the first time that the Baron had indicated the probability of his early retirement to some unknown region; so that what he now said was no surprise to his hearers. He went on,

“Where I am going, it matters inconceivably little whether men, in your world, hold my name lightly or in respect. Yours is of far greater practical consequence, and you must protect that by any means that seem fit to you.”

They had all been examining the records of the previous evening's address too diligently to be oblivious of the direct bearing this had on the question in hand.

“As far as I can make it out,” said Mrs. Miller, stoutly, “we were all told plainly

enough last night that we ought to stand by the Professor."

"The point at issue does not seem to me," said Blane, "to be personal in its nature. I should certainly be willing to stand by the Professor if he were wronged in any way. If public opinion comes, for instance, to treat the Professor unjustly, and we, knowing more about the true facts, see that, why, good Heavens! we should stand by him in face of any calumnious attack. But we don't yet know anything of the rights of the story to come out. It may prove that the Professor is to blame. In that case we can't pretend to think he is not to blame. We should not help him by doing that, and we should merely forfeit whatever little influence or opportunity of usefulness we may have ourselves.

"I can't help," said Captain Miller, "going back to what we heard last night. This affair was evidently foreseen, and yet the warning was plain against being too much afraid of standing beside a man because people generally might be down upon him."

The conversation led to no very definite conclusions. Blane emphasised his repudi-

ation of the idea that he could be supposed to shrink from incurring odium as such. The question was merely one of being sure of standing on the side of the right—and as regards the work they proposed doing, of not running the risk of ruining a great undertaking by taking it on hand in an indiscreet way.

“Granted the Professor has great gifts that might be of the utmost service, has he other qualities which may render those gifts worse than useless? It is a question of fact; not of willingness on our part to incur more or less criticism or censure. Who cares for that? I’m sure I don’t.”

The Baron remained with their shrunken little party during the evening, but a certain depression of spirits had come over them. The loss of the Professor robbed them of the main-spring of their vitality. The energy and general overbearingness of his character had absorbed and obliterated the energies of the others while he had been with them. They seemed now left without compass or rudder.”

“Jem,” said Mrs. Miller, when the hostess

of Heiligenfels and her mate were alone together at the end of the evening, "for the first time in his life Willie Blane is annoying me. He's too finikin."

"Take my advice, and trust to the Baron to manage Willie. That'll all come straight in time."

"In time! and what are we to do meanwhile? It seems to me the whole thing is over, and we've all collapsed. We'd better propose to clear out next."

"H'm!" murmured the Captain, as though reflecting to himself. "Weak-brained sort of chap the Baron—to get a lot of people together into this business, that all crumple up as soon as trouble sets in."

"Who are you calling names? It isn't the Baron's fault."

"If his crew all desert the ship before he pays her off, it won't seem as though he'd made a very good choice when he first took them on board, will it?"

"Jem," said Mrs. Miller, gazing at him calmly for a few seconds, and perceiving the satire conveyed in his remark, "if you can't find anything to say except to turn

your superior officer into ridicule, you'd better smoke."

"Oh! then I hadn't better go and tell the Baron we are thinking of clearing out?"

"If you propose anything of that sort again, Jem," said Mrs. Miller, "I'll divorce you!"

CHAPTER X.

MIRIAM'S LOVERS.

THE Professor had been right in assuming that news of the divorce proceeding instituted by his wife would filter into the papers in anticipation of the slow progress of legal ceremonies. Paragraphs began to make their appearance at once, and these were coupled with curious hints concerning odd circumstances under which the facts in preparation for submission to the proper tribunal, had come to light. The Professor, it was announced, had been engaged lately in some insane attempt to revive the ancient practices of witchcraft; and his wife, long a sufferer from his cruelty and suspicious of his fidelity, had been driven by indignation at the blasphemous nature of this extraordinary enterprise to

fly from the miserable hut in the Hartz Mountains, to which her husband had decoyed her, in order that she might be made the instrument of some of his incantations, and take refuge with friends. There she had been put on the scent of the information which was shortly to be laid before the courts. This statement was no sooner issued than it was declared by other paragraphs to be erroneous in some of its details. The Professor had not been concerned with any grovelling experiments with Macbeth cauldrons. If possible the situation seemed to be rather worse than this, for his wife when she joined him abroad—having quitted the protection of one of her noble relatives for this purpose—had found him established in a palace on the shores of a Swiss lake, the property of a wealthy Austrian Count. Over the mind of this half-witted being he had obtained extraordinary ascendancy, and by his resources he had been enabled to organise a vast phantasmagorial display of apparently supernatural effects, the purpose of which was to blind the understanding of a number of persons he had gathered together, and lead

them into the formation of a league for the cultivation of the black art on entirely new principles. In one form or another, the story, told of course in a guarded way, attracted a good deal of attention, as it provided an easy subject for lively journalists. "The new Chair of Witchcraft," "Biology and Broomsticks,"—in allusion to one of the ordinary branches of science with which Professor Massilton's name was associated,—"Divorce and Demonology," were a few of the titles which began to decorate the newspaper advertisement bills soon after the Professor's return to London. This certainly was not the way in which he had intended to launch the new ideas he had picked up at Heiligenfels on the attention of the reading public. He bought the newspapers which amused themselves with his affairs, and read them quietly at his chambers, hurt very little by the light sarcasms on his own intelligence with which they abounded, from the stings of which he was protected by the consciousness of superior knowledge, but still fretting a good deal at the thought that he would naturally be held

responsible in the eyes of the friends with whom he had intended to co-operate, for all this premature splashing of inconsiderate folly he had so unintentionally provoked.

For the moment, however, he was far too wise in his generation to make any sign in reply to the jeering with which he was assailed. He did not regard the problems with which he had lately been concerned, as likely to be treated successfully by letters to the papers, so he left the jokers to wear the subject out at their own sweet will, and meanwhile addressed himself to a wholly different matter.

He was determined to see Miriam Seaford. Nearly a year had elapsed since he and she had parted. As he had told the Baron, that parting had been brought about by no wish of his. Certainly it had not left him oppressed with an overwhelming grief, but it had cut him deeply at the time. Miriam had thoroughly engaged his ardent affections. He had thrown himself into the romance of his attachment to her, with all the usual energy of his nature. Subject as their relations had been to rupture at any moment,

their prolongation over a period of many months had never been tinged with a suspicion of satiety. He had been as much in love with her—a good deal more in love with her in fact—at the end of their *liason* than at the beginning. And he had pondered a good deal over the psychological problem she presented to his mind. That she had been in love with him he did not question for a moment. And the course of events had shown that considerations which would have restrained most women, had very little weight with her. There had never been any private marriage between them, as she had told her aunt, to sooth the distress her conduct occasioned. But still she had believed that a marriage would ultimately put their relations on a regular footing. The Professor had “paltered” with the truth, as he acknowledged to himself, but he had not been guilty, he argued in his own mind, of seduction, for two reasons. First, the essence of that offence he conceived to lie in subsequent desertion, and he never contemplated deserting Miriam for a moment. Secondly, he had not been mani-

pulating false promises to overcome scruples on her own part. Miriam had had no scruples. She was a girl of altogether independent character, for whom conventional rules, as such, had no force whatever. Their compact had been set in the clear light of a mutual understanding from the first. He had framed ingenious theories, having to do with college fellowship rules and the terms under which he held certain appointments, as accounting for the fact which he most frankly declared all through—that he could not marry. Miriam had seemed to accept this condition of things. He had quite voluntarily made legal dispositions of property in her favour to ensure her from the contingency of widowhood. But she had never availed herself of these after she left him, had returned to him the documents connected with them which had been put in her hands, and had obliterated them as far as her act could accomplish this. She must have relied on a legal marriage as the end of their relationship, the Professor persuaded himself; and when at last she came to learn the real state of the facts,—for deceptions of

this kind can rarely be kept up for very long, —she must in some subtle way have found the position outraging to her self-respect on principles it was not easy to follow, seeing that her self-respect had endured the establishment of their peculiar relations.

Now the situation had changed. All the Professor's passion for her was kindled afresh at the idea that she was now about to pass into the lawful companionship of another man. And a view of duty in the matter was readily constructed in his mind in a way which harmonised with inclination. It would be wrong to let Annerley marry a woman with a past history of which he might be quite ignorant. He should know the truth—assuming that he had been kept in ignorance of this—though the Professor, knowing the fearless and uncompromising character of the lady concerned, did not believe it likely that she had withheld the truth. However, whichever way this might be, Annerley should be protected from marriage with a woman who did not love him, provided this engagement had merely been accepted by Miriam as a *pis aller*.

Nothing could be worse for him than that result, argued the Professor, his keen reasoning faculties failing this time to give him a picture of Annerly's state of mind, according to which alienation of his love was the only supreme misery, and association with her, on any terms, happiness—in varying degrees, perhaps, according to her feeling about him, but still, on any terms, happiness.

The Professor had never argued the matter with Miriam, either at the time she left him or by letter since. No line had ever passed between them. He was not a man to plead or entreat in such a case. Her position had been simple, "You have deceived me. I will have nothing more to do with you." His answer had been, "I kept back a fact from you, but I did not deceive you in essence. I always said it was impossible I could marry you, and I can't. I wish I could." "You deceived me," was the only reply. They had a chilly rather than a stormy scene at a hotel in Geneva. He argued, "I loved you": she decided that "that was no excuse." She had travelled

to London by herself, refusing his proffered escort peremptorily, and they had never met since. But now the situation was, or was about to be, materially changed. He certainly could not have courted the disgrace of the divorce proceedings; he could not have stooped to provide them adequate justification; and he was puzzled now to understand how Lady Emily would construct a charge of cruelty against him to fortify her other plea, and bear out the petition she was addressing to the court; though resolved, under the circumstances, to play into her hands in this matter; but now the disgrace of the divorce would have to be borne in any case. It would be minimised if it should be immediately succeeded by his marriage with the lady whose name, by his fault, would thus be dragged into a humiliating publicity; and he would be able to offer Miriam the fullest possible redress of the past deception of which she complained.

His plan of action was promptly arranged. To go to Miriam without explaining his proposal beforehand would be to court a rebuff. To write to her and await an answer would

be to leave her open to other influences than his own. He would arrange that a letter explaining his position should be handed to her at a convenient opportunity when she was alone, and he would follow it up by appearing in her presence ten minutes later. The assistance of a private inquiry-agent would enable him to ascertain the few external circumstances he required to know. *Qui veut la fin* must submit to *les moyens*, he declared to himself, to conquer a certain sense of repugnance with which he engaged the services he required. He wrote, meanwhile, with his accustomed straightforward simplicity, the note to be despatched at the fitting moment.

“MY DEAR MIRIAM,

“—For dear you must always be to me —when we last parted I told you I wished I could marry you. You would then have been willing to marry me; but I was unable. As circumstances are now falling out, I shall be able to marry you as soon as certain divorce proceedings, of which you may have heard, are concluded. I never change a clearly-defined desire, and the wish to

marry you is as strong with me as ever. Should I persuade you to agree to it, I shall be eager to complete our union—so sadly interrupted—within the shortest period possible after the divorce is pronounced.

“I have heard that you are engaged to marry another man. If you love him and no longer love me, do so by all means. Your great good sense will assuredly, in that case, lead you to clear all possibility of future misunderstandings out of your path by frankness with him at the outset; and I would earnestly express a hope that all good things might be your portion, health and prosperity, and a love that should appreciate you through life.

“If you don’t love him, and do still love me, for all our sakes—and foremost for your own dear sake—give up all thought of marrying him. It would be a terrible madness, productive inevitably of awful misery, foremost of all for him. Does it seem odd that I do not say foremost of all for me? My dear child, as *you know*, I am truthful and candid by nature, though once (as you will have it) I told you, or let you think I told

you, a big solitary falsehood. In that matter I acted under a correspondingly big temptation, for I was bent on winning you. Well; I say now, that, if you marry a man without loving him, you will make him suffer in the long run so much that nobody can take precedence of him as a victim of that mistake.

“You will see, I think, that I am a reasonable person still, as you have always known me. You had better see me and talk this matter over—then there can be no misunderstandings between us at any rate. I shall present myself at your door very shortly after you get this letter, and I hope you will let me in.

“Ever yours faithfully,

“ARTHUR MASSILTON.”

For Annerly, while all this was going on, the shadow of the impending divorce proceedings, in which he knew that Miriam's name must be so painfully mixed up, had lain but as a small cloud upon a distant horizon during a sunny day. He was never tired of telling Miriam how her presence near him again—the privilege of gazing in her face and sitting with his arms about her—was such

bliss to him that any other thought except the all-pervading consciousness of that ecstasy, seemed suspended for the time. For a day or two after her restoration to him at Purfleet she had stayed on at her farmhouse and he had found quarters at an inn in the neighbourhood. He would not have lost much of her society if he had gone back to town by the last train and had returned by the first in the morning, but still he would have been sensible of losing some. He would have been watching the time in the evening, when he would rather have been drinking in the radiance of her beauty in total forgetfulness of all other facts in the world. And she was very gentle and submissive to his worship. That was her only demonstration. She surrendered herself to his tornado of tenderness.

“You have suffered for the want of me. I have been more cruel to you than I knew. Take your compensation.”

She never withdrew herself from his embraces—except indeed once during the Purfleet time, when they were sitting in the little Enchanted Wood, as they came to call it—when the fire of his love had been playing

on her heart in some way she may not have fully comprehended, and the dark rugged face of her lover, surmounted by its great shock of black hair, was lighted up by the gleam of almost poetic genius—the inspiration of his perfect devotion. For three days she had seen no one but him and the old farmer, her nurse's husband.

“Geordie,” she said, “sit up—be still!”

There was a tone of surprise and indecision in her voice, and yet no displeasure—nothing to alarm even so sensitive a lover as Annerly, but still something that claimed explanation.

“What is the matter?”

“A curious sensation that was not in the new compact between us. I merely undertook to let you love me—wasn't that so?”

“To let me love, worship, adore you—to accept my unutterable devotion, my beautiful queen. That is all I claim.”

“But it appears to me, Geordie, that I am getting fond of you.”

The ebb and flow of love is a mystery of nature. Miriam felt the magnitude of Annerly's claim upon her, arising out of his

suffering on her account—to be less oppressive in view of the possibility that, after all, she might come to be herself desirous of, as well as sacrificially willing to acquiesce in, a marriage between them.

“Now we’ll go back to town,” she declared. “The sweetest situation must come to an end, sooner or later. Even you will get weary, even of me, if we stay here much longer, and then, perhaps, I might feel regret—which would never do.”

She had fallen into adopting, half in joke, Annerly’s frequently-asserted theory, that the least evil that could befall her was greater than the greatest evil that could befall any one else.

“My queen,” he would say, “it is a privilege to suffer for your sake. It is only suffering which does you no good, that should be unbearable for others.”

So they returned together to Miss Jame-son’s little *ménage* at the close of the day. Annerly stayed the evening with them, during the greater part of which time the good aunt effaced herself, and spent some hours privately in her bedroom, praying

tearfully, and hoping ardently, that now at last her beloved girl might find her path smooth and pleasant, and the haven she was approaching, one of rest and peace.

Miriam evaded the settlement of a day for the marriage. She promised to issue commands on the subject at no distant date, but said that the emotions she had lately gone through, had been rather tearing and bewildering. She would rather be made love to lazily and dreamily for a little while longer, before turning their romance into anything so commonplace as matrimony. Annerly would not have feared that the romance would suffer by any measures which could ensure its permanence, but he was not in a position to dispute Miriam's will in the matter; and thus the days passed, occupied by the happy lover in cheerful and unremitting industry during all such working hours as it was inconvenient or undesired by Miriam that he should spend with her.

From Heiligenfels he received frequent letters from Merland, telling him in general terms of the work going on there, and of the clairvoyant visions they were having with

Mrs. Lakesby, though the account of these was left imperfect from motives Annerly naturally failed to interpret aright. It seemed to him that he was dropped out of the innermost confidence of the circle at the castle by reason of having fallen back into the ordinary aspirations of a life that sought happiness in the world, and he did not rebel against the justice of this treatment. He was only grateful to Merland, as he explained, for any information that could be given to him in regard to what might be going on.

“From the occult point of view,” he wrote, “I am a miserable backslider. But you have known enough of my state of mind, during the last few years, to understand that under the circumstances this is inevitable. I hope you will talk the matter over with the Baron sufficiently to be sure that he shares your comprehension of this. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse*. It is impossible for me to write to him in adequate explanation of my conduct without seeming to feel too apologetic. I could say what I believe to be the truth, that, as things have fallen

out, I am destined to be a shield and protection for my beloved Miriam in her great need, that duty would suggest the abandonment by me—for the sake of playing this part—of any personal spiritual advantage I might gain in another path of life. But I do not want to seem hypocritically charging to duty what my own overmastering desire would command me to do quite irrespective of duty. However we analyse it, since fate allows me to be Miriam Seaford's husband after all, I will not, for any consideration, leave the responsibilities of that trust to any other man. Put my case honestly to the Baron, but put it so that he may know how I recognise to the fullest extent the terrible magnitude of the loss I incur by foregoing what it seemed at one time might have been within my reach—the privilege of being his pupil, and of endeavouring to follow in his footsteps, as far as this unworthy personality of mine might have enabled me to go.”

In reply to this, Annerly received a letter from the Baron himself.

“MY DEAR ANNERLY,” the Baron wrote.

“I gather from our friend Merland that

you would be glad, even in the midst of what seems your new-found happiness, to have an assurance from me that I recognise the irresistible force of the circumstances which have induced you to take certain steps you have lately taken. You would have been more or less than—the man you are, to have followed any other course. I believe you are willing to put down to weakness and passion your abandonment of the life of occult study you were so well inclined for—in some respects. But duty need not be ignored because it sometimes chimes in with inclination. If, as I understand, you could hardly have remained in the occult path without sacrificing interests of another person, that had come to be dependent on you, then I think you are quite justified in acting as you did. Happily you were bound by no vows, the infraction of which would have involved a feeling of humiliation, and perhaps worse consequences. I wrote above, what *seems* your new-found happiness, because, while making all possible allowance for your feelings, I do not pretend myself to regard any of the transitory delights which

physical existence may afford, as more than shows and delusive appearances of happiness. They come to an end sooner or later, while nothing is regarded as true happiness, in the occult sense, except that which is enduring; and nothing in the nature of consciousness can be enduring unless it is seated in the higher principles of man's nature, which are but very little if at all concerned with the phenomena of earthly life as understood by our generation. I do not want to belittle or disparage the emotions which invest it for you with the attributes of reality. Don't regret the time we spent together. I do not, I assure you, for I know that, come what may, the seeds sown during that time have not been sown in vain. It is better to go a little way in a comprehension of your spiritual opportunities in the ultimate future than not to get any comprehension of them at all. And, though I would be no prophet of any coming evil, the chances and changes of life at *some* future time may lead you to feel that your studies at Heiligenfels after all were not altogether wasted."

It was not till later that Annerly noticed how the phraseology of this note, the kindly feeling of which was all that struck him on a first perusal, was suited to more than one contingency. For the moment he studied it with less attention than he might have given it had it come alone, by reason of the fact that the same post brought him another letter, sent on from the office of a weekly newspaper with which he was closely connected. This was as follows :

“DEAR MR. ANNERLY,

“Though you did not see us I saw you to-day flash by in a hansom cab, as mamma and I were driving down Regent Street. We are in town for two or three days, on our way to Devonshire, after paying a country visit. I am most eager to hear what took place at Heiligenfels after we left. I am sure all kinds of interesting things must have happened. Do come and see me to-morrow. Come any time during the day that is convenient to you, in the morning, to lunch, or in the afternoon, but mind you

come, and send me a telegram to say when I shall expect you.

“Yours sincerely,

“LUCY VAUGHAN.”

“What does that mean?” Annerly asked himself. “Just what lies on the surface or something more? She would be interested in the occurrences at the castle, of course—but she might have repressed that curiosity if she had looked back on any of them with resentment.”

He telegraphed to fix an hour in the rather late afternoon for going to Eaton Square in response to Miss Vaughan's summons, so that he might not neglect his appointment for that day with Miriam at an earlier hour, and then turned to work.

CHAPTER XI.

THE INEVITABLE RESULT.

HE found her when he went to her in the afternoon sitting in a low easy chair, with a book in her lap. "Miss Seaford is in the drawing-room," the servant had said, retiring, after opening the outer door, to her own quarters, for he was already at home in the house, and did not, under the circumstances, require to be announced.

"My queen," he said, as he knelt down by her chair, doing affectionate homage to her on his entrance, "the echo of my old yearning for you during the long days when that was in vain, makes me almost tremble with anxiety every time I come to you, lest the blessed fact that you are waiting for me

and expecting me, should somehow prove delusive."

"It is all one big delusion in one way," she said. "Why are you so infatuated about me I wonder? It seems a kind of madness."

"Not a kind of madness, but perhaps a mystery. We know, from the ordinary point of view at any rate, so little about life, that we rarely seek to go behind the facts of any acquaintance between a man and the woman he is in love with, to find out the explanation of that state of things. But I have come to realise lately that two people may perhaps have known one another a great deal longer really in other states of existence than they are aware of when they meet in this."

During the days they had spent together in the country he had already told her a great deal of the new view of things in general he had obtained at Heiligenfels, and indeed had given her the fullest account of all the wonders that had transpired there up to the date of his departure.

"I don't like the notion of being all in

the dark about what has taken place before. Supposing you and I have known each other in some former life, how can I tell how you behaved to me then? Perhaps," she cried, sitting up suddenly as though moved by a happy thought, "you may have treated me very badly before, and have justified me in my behaviour to you !"

"If we knew one another before," said Annerly, earnestly, "I am sure of one thing—that I loved you before. I don't think, indeed, it wants explanation, the fact that I love you now. The motive for that is quite sufficiently obvious, without going back behind this life; but if you don't think it sufficient you may assume that another lifetime spent in adoring you was concentrated in my nature to begin with."

"One should have been enough."

"But you would not wish that I had found it so?"

"I don't know. I tell you, your love frightens me sometimes—it seems more than is natural. There is only one consolation, you know. It can't last like this if we get married."

"If! Won't you say when?"

"When we get married then. What's that line about man never being, but always expecting to be, blessed?"

"Man never is, but always to be blest."

"That's it. Well, in some upside-down kind of way, that idea might be applied to woman's marriage. It's always to be but it never is a blessed state of things for her."

"Oh, Miriam, my own, if you could only realise the extent to which I mean to make it a blessed state for you, so far as my unchangeable worship can make it so!"

"This is a blessed state, Geordie, except for horrors that may be impending over me. I am sure you are getting the very maximum of happiness it is possible to extract from my society; and, considering the angelic way Aunt Ellen eclipses herself for your benefit whenever you come, I don't know what more you can want."

"She is angelic. But I am insatiable. However, that does not require arguing. At my queen's own sweet pleasure there will come a time, let us hope, that I shall not be any more dependent on Aunt Ellen's goodness."

Annerly told her, soon after this, about the note he had had from Miss Vaughan and all that might lurk within it for Merland.

"I can't suppose that she would write to me, Merland's especial friend, if she did not mean something."

"And is Mr. Merland as badly hurt as you have been?"

"No one can compare his own feelings with another man's. He loved her most truly, no doubt; though latterly he was reconciling himself, it seemed to me from his letters, to the idea of following what we call the occult life, which involves the renunciation of all happiness of the ordinary sort for the sake of sublime spiritual exaltation to be ultimately attained through that sacrifice."

"That's the life you would have led if I had not crossed your path again."

"Probably."

"And don't you think, Geordie, looking at it in a really impartial way, that sublime spiritual exaltation might have been much better for you than—me?"

"You see what the election was that I made

when the two opportunities were offered to me."

"I don't think I ever realised that fully before," she said reflectively; "that after all I have spoilt your life; even if I give you myself—as we have arranged—to get tired of at your leisure."

"Miriam, my darling, let us hope you will be graciously pleased not to talk like that any more. Have I failed to make you understand the extent to which I thirsted for you? Shall I begin the explanation all over again? I am never tired of it for my part."

But Miriam would not quit the subject, and questioned Annerly closely in regard to the expectations he had been led to form as to what it might have been possible for him to achieve if he had devoted his life entirely to becoming a follower and disciple of Baron von Mondstern. Annerly naturally rated at their lowest the possibilities that would have lain before him, but then she followed up the other lead suggested by Merland's position.

"Now supposing this young lady says she is ready to accept your friend, and supposing your friend comes to you for advice as to

what he should do under the circumstances, what would you say?"

"My queen, it is always incumbent on every one to give every one else about to marry the well-known advice of *Punch*, because the people for whom it is inappropriate, will not take it."

"Will you please to give me a serious answer? Mr. Merland, I understand, has great respect for your advice and influence. You will not deal with him at random in such a matter?"

"Well, then, I should never seriously dream of doing more than putting the alternatives fairly before him. I would try to be sure he was not acting from an immature caprice in turning aside from that life, which, if a man can tread it with cheerful determination, may lead to something not necessarily a happier state than a happy life of the ordinary kind, but probably higher in the scale of nature. But, if I had reason to believe Merland's love for Miss Vaughan came at all within any range of comparison with mine for you, then I should counsel him to marry her if he has the chance."

“Ah, you say that to justify yourself.”

“I say that because I have had certain experiences that I would not wish Merland to have.”

It will be seen that Miriam's mood on this occasion was not exactly in harmony with that which had been stirred for a time in the “enchanted wood.” She would not let go the idea that had just presented itself to her mind, that her lover would have had a superior career open to him if he had not elected to resume the interrupted course of his engagement to her.

“My Miriam !” Annerly at last urged in pathetic entreaty, “will you not consent to put me out of the question for a time, and think of yourself? As things have fallen out, are you not content for your own sake that you did cross my path again?”

She gave him her hand voluntarily at this appeal.

“I was very miserable, Geordie, I confess, and you comforted me. Well, let us hope it is all for the best, and—well, since you quite finally mean not to turn back, we

may as well perhaps think about—the date when it is to be.”

“When I hear you say that,” Annerly murmured to her almost reverently, “you give me such intense delight that it seems as if I had never been truly happy until this moment.”

Still the date was not actually fixed.

“I will think about it while you are away, and let you know this evening,” she said, for it had been arranged that he should return again after dining in town.

When he went away, she sat still in the arm-chair beside the little writing-table in the window, thinking vaguely, unoccupied and listless. She was only roused from this reverie, after a considerable lapse of time, by the entrance of the servant with a letter for her—the Professor’s letter.

She was not listless now. She sprang up and moved about the room in fierce excitement. She could not have told what the emotion was that possessed her. Her aunt came into the drawing-room, dressed for going out, but she kept herself in hand, and said nothing of the letter she was actually

holding during the few minutes her aunt spoke to her. She was constitutionally reserved, and it would have been an effort for her, instead of a natural impulse, to have told even her aunt of the dilemma in which she was placed at that early moment of its development.

“I mean to go over and call on the Blenkinsops, darling. Would you like to come too, or would you rather rest quietly at home to-day?”

To Miss Jameson’s constant tenderness Miriam was always assumed to be in need of rest and nursing.

“I’ll stop at home, aunty dear,” she said without hesitation.

Miss Jameson noticed that she was a little nervous, but put it down to the strain of her emotions, and bade her good-bye with affectionate kisses.

“Fate leaves me alone to receive him,” Miriam said to herself.

She gave no orders to the servant. She let things drift. She heard a knock at the door, and the entrance of a visitor. An impulse not to be surprised in apparent agita-

tion made her turn to the writing-table in the window, at which she sat down, beginning to push about some of the letters and papers before her, without thought of what they were, and it was in this position that the Professor first caught sight of her as he came into the room. It flashed upon him vividly that it was thus, at a little table before the window in a small sitting-room, that Mrs. Lakesby had seen her in the clairvoyant vision of her caught for a moment during his last morning at Heiligensfels, in the clairvoyant vision which had conveyed to Mrs. Lakesby the impression that the woman so seen, loved him.

“My dear child!” he said, with a commanding sort of tenderness as he came across to her. She stood up as he came in and turned round without speaking, with a frown upon her brows, leaning back against the table with one hand upon it behind her.

“It does me good to see you again,” he went on. “Shake hands at all events. That’s right,” as she slowly lifted her hand to meet the one he held out, unhesitatingly. “I come to you with proposals you may not

care to accept, but at all events you can't reproach me for making them, so we can talk them over like friends anyhow."

"You deceived me," she said. They were nearly the last words she had spoken to him at their parting, nearly a year ago. It was not with any set purpose that she opened the conversation this way. She had not intended to speak those words in particular, but they rose to her lips in obedience to what seemed the necessity that she should say something.

"My dear child," replied the Professor, almost laughing, "that was what you said to me before. Of course I did. The situation was too complicated to admit of entire candour at the outset. But I only deceived you in a detail; and I will tell you of one matter in which I defy you to say I deceived you. I never deceived you when I said I loved you; I never deceived you when I said I wished it had been in my power to marry you; and I stand here now to ask you if I did not tell truth in those principal things?"

"It does not matter now which way it

was, but if you had not wounded me by the deception I speak of, things might be different."

"My dear Miriam," said the Professor in his frankest manner, "I could not help myself. You would never have listened to me in the first instance if you had known then that I had been a married man. But don't harp any longer on that old string. Let us look to the future in a practical way, by the light of new circumstances that have arisen. Now do sit down quietly like the grandly sensible girl you are, and let us talk. No, don't you sit there. You take this easy chair, and make yourself comfortable. I'll sit there—I like upright chairs. That's better. Now do answer me a plain straightforward question to begin with, and then I shall know how to deal with you. Have you fallen in love with our friend Annerly?"

"What right have you to ask me the question?" she cried impetuously.

The Professor put up one hand, waved it slightly as in deprecation of her tone, and in the gentlest and most explanatory way replied:

"No right whatever. It isn't a question of right. We're just talking over certain things of great moment to you, and you know quite well that I have your welfare at heart in what I say. Everything is in your own hands to do exactly as you please—you are strong enough to take your own course. But there isn't any sort of reason why you should not listen to what I say and take it into consideration. You are thinking, I know, of marrying Annerly. Well, you will be equally able to do that, if you are resolved about it, after hearing why, in my opinion, it would be better for you to wait a little longer and marry me."

"Wait a little longer! Has any body told you that I am in a hurry?"

"There is such a thing as acting precipitately, without being in a hurry in the sense of being eager."

The Professor betrayed no triumph, but he felt from the flavour of her retort that Mrs. Lakesby's impression was already half vindicated at all events. She did not love Annerly.

"You have taken me by surprise. I do

not feel sure that I would have consented to see you at all if I had thought the matter over more at leisure."

There was a great contrast between her manner in talking to Professor Massilton and that which was usual to her with Annerly. With either she could not but be queenly and graceful; with neither was she nervous or timid. But with Annerly the grand slow movements of her neck and head, the dignity of her smile, so different from the seductive, inviting smile of coquetry, would have seemed, to any observer who could have compared her two moods, plainly associated with lethargy of the emotions. Now, in talking to the Professor, she was still proud and self-controlled, but her outward calm was produced by the exercise of a strong will, crushing down an internal excitement.

"I am sure you would have seen me, in any case," said the Professor; "for to have shrunk from that would have been a weakness, and you are never weak. You may tell me to be gone after listening to what I have got to say, because you will act as you

please, but, even if you do that, I believe you will give me a reason for refusing my proposals, because to deny me that would be rude, and you are never rude."

Miriam was not moved to make any reply to this. She leaned back in her chair, and, as her head rested against the back with her face partly turned up, her clear grey eyes looked straight into her visitor's face, and she held her features in expressionless and statuesque repose, though her heightened colour—heightening her beauty—and her quickened breathing enabled her sagacious suitor to make allowances for her chilly bearing and the affected iciness of the tone in which she spoke. He himself sat beside the opposite corner of the writing-table with one arm resting on it, and his manner was easy and natural, his bearing frank, sunny, and cheerful as usual. The large proportions of the man—nowhere associated with the coarseness or clumsiness of shape that comes on so often in middle life—his perfect healthiness, that made him pleasant to look upon in a greater degree than better claims to be considered handsome might have rendered another man—all these attributes,

uniting to produce an exhilarating emanation from his presence, were very apparent to Miriam as she steadily gazed at him while he spoke.

“ I have not come to you before, because I had nothing fresh to say, and you made up your mind that our old relationship should end, but I come to you now because the complexion of affairs has changed. I committed a great act of folly in marrying Lady Emily, and I was powerless to undo it. Happily she is going to undo it for me. This will cost me a good deal of money, but it won't ruin me. It will cost you, my poor dear, and that is a great deal worse, a great deal of annoyance, but *that won't last*. Now, if we marry immediately we are able, a world prone to forgetfulness will hardly nourish any resentment against you. In a little while people will only remember vaguely that there was something funny about the Massiltons before they were married. If you marry Annerly the whole situation will look quite different. You will have nothing to live for but his affection, which may be very great. I don't doubt

that it is very great. How could it be otherwise? But any woman who marries a man merely to oblige him, without ardently wishing it herself too, is preparing an awful future for him. For, I tell you, no woman living is strong enough to play, to the end, a part, in such a business as marriage. A love that you don't return may still be pleasant for you to receive for the moment, but it will be terribly irksome to you in the long-run."

"And suppose I have given promises. Are they to count for nothing?"

"Promises are terrible things. I do not underrate them for an instant. But people may be released from promises, and no man worth the name would hold a woman against her will to a promise of the kind we are talking of."

Miriam was in rather a helpless position in the argument because she could not rebuke the Professor's appeal to her own interests as an appeal to selfishness. That would have been tantamount to admitting that her inclinations would deliver her into his hands. On the other hand she found it

difficult to declare boldly her devotion to Annerly, and supreme inclination, above all things, to keep her newly-plighted troth. The conversation went on for a long time, as it had begun, fed by a few disjointed remarks from Miriam, from time to time, but supported mainly by the Professor, who expanded and amplified the theme of his letter with great ease, freedom, and eloquence. Of his own love for her he spoke as of a topic which it would be obtrusive on his part to press for the present.

“You know I love you,” he pointed out ; “you know I never wavered in that, never wished to interrupt our relations, which constituted a true marriage in all but legality. You know by my presence here to-day, without a word more said, that I love you still, so I won’t dwell upon that.”

It was a great strain upon Miriam’s self-command to keep up an appearance of composure. Torn as she really was by conflicting feelings, it was inevitable that this should break down sooner or later. The incident which upset her equanimity, as things turned out, was a remark of the Pro-

fessor's, which he almost threw off as a joke—

“Has it ever struck you that you took a mean advantage of me in running away and breaking off what I have so justly called our true marriage? You just left me in a pet and made me very miserable because I had no legal hold over you. If it had not been for my previous entanglements we should have been married like other people, but, as it happened that we could not be, you were free to break faith with me.”

“Oh, how dare you put the fault on me like that after all I have gone through?”

Her lips quivered and her eyes filled, but still she maintained a little longer her attempt not to cry outright.

“My dear Miriam, I don't want to reproach you. I only ask you to look at the facts as they really stand in order that you may not reproach me undeservedly. I think you are taking a distorted view of the whole position. I was quite true to you in act and feeling, and never meant to be anything else. The more I think the thing over the less, it seems to me, I am to blame. For all

the stuff of a quarrel that there was between us we ought to have made it up thoroughly in two days at the outside."

A vivid reminiscence of all the pain she might have saved herself if she had taken that view of the matter at the time swept over her consciousness, and with it the ghastly conviction that the new path she had chalked out for herself did not really allure her footsteps. The emotions that assailed her were almost written on her face as she looked wildly up to the ceiling.

"Now won't you think if it isn't time for us to be friends again? You used to be happy with me, Mirry darling, and I'm just as much in love with you as ever."

"Oh, you don't know what you're saying!" and now the break-down finally came, and, turning round towards the back of the easy-chair, she buried her face in her handkerchief and sobbed outright. The Professor came over and stood beside her chair, leaning on the back and very gently stroking her head.

"Poor darling! you must have been unhappy. Why did not you write and tell me

so? I couldn't come to you without some sign after the way you left me. But now, just give me your hand and you need not say another word, and it will be all right again between us. I respect your free will so much, you see, that, till you give me a sign, I will not even touch you, to speak of."

"I tell you he will go mad. You don't know the way he loves me."

"And I tell you if you marry a man you don't, for your own sake, want to marry, no matter how he loves you, you will have gone mad. Such a reckless sacrifice is the most shocking thing I ever heard of. It would shock Annerly if he understood it."

"I do not pretend ——" She did not finish the sentence in that way, but beginning it afresh, after a pause, "I treated him badly when I threw him over before; to do it again now is *impossible*."

"What a pity Annerly is not here. If he heard you say that, and felt all that it covers, the whole problem would be solved."

"It would kill him."

"I am sure he would suffer, but I respect

him too much to believe that he would not rather bear anything than hold you to a promise against your will, and wreck your happiness for life. If you don't love him—and that is clear—he must know it. But he may have most erroneously supposed that his was the only protection available for you; and then, loving you, he would of course marry you at any risk, hoping that it would be the best thing for you. Now look here, Mirry darling. Shall I explain matters to him, if it is too painful for you? You can see him afterwards to be sure I have explained them right; but I know you will trust me to be honest in the matter, and I swear to you I will manage the matter in a way that shall be most tender and respectful to his feelings.”

At first she would only declare that it would be better for her to die. But her victorious lover felt that her surrender could only be a question of time. On his side there were all the forces of her own desire, and the memories of the happy time they had spent together; all the prospects of future happiness, of a recovered position in

the world. On the other, there was merely her terror at the thought of what her second desertion of him would mean for Annerly. The Professor accidentally touched a powerful note when he said, in the course of their talk:

“I honestly believe that it will be better for Annerly in the long-run not to marry even though that means the loss of you. There may be great destinies in store for him along another path in life, which he is altogether fitted for, but for this disastrous passion for you.”

“Oh, if he could only think so!” said Miriam.

“My dear, I don’t propose that you should desert him, I merely say—let him understand the truth and judge for himself. I think better of him than you seem to; he will rather sacrifice himself than you, and in the long-run he will realise that, even as regards himself, that sacrifice will be rewarded by triumphs of a wholly different sort from those he is aiming at now. Only don’t let him hurry us all blindfold to destruction without knowing what he is about, and how

the whole matter really stands. I will do nothing without your leave, but understand what I propose. I will write to him if you do not positively forbid me, telling him the whole truth from myself. I will not say I am telling it as a message from you. I will merely tell him to refer to you, if he doubts me, for confirmation of the facts, and then leave him to act as a man of honour should. If he still resolves that you shall sacrifice yourself, then you will still be at liberty to do so."

A little later he said :

"Now if you want all our lives to be wrecked on a fatal misunderstanding for want of courage to speak truth, you will refuse me your hand." He took her hand as he spoke—and she left it in his grasp.

CHAPTER XII.

A DOUBLE DISAPPOINTMENT.

ANNERLY had been spending the latter part of the afternoon very pleasantly in the back drawing-room of the Vaughans' house in Eaton Square, supplied by the beautiful Lucy with tea, in fragile cups of extraordinary perfection, in the corner of a couch overshadowed by a magnificent palm-tree, which stood just within the drawing-room, against the open glass-doors leading into a large conservatory filled with tropic growths of luxuriant splendour. Lucy often declared that she never felt quite sure whether she was a sybarite or an ascetic, for she gathered so many nice things about her, but cared for them so little.

"What I care about now, Mr. Annerly," she said, "is to hear all that passed at Heiligenfels after we left—every single thing. I have not had a letter from anyone there, and I want to be told everything."

Annerly went over the whole story in as much detail as possible, and day by day. Miss Vaughan asked questions, as he went along, about every one concerned, and her face flamed with excitement at the narrative of what had taken place in the wood.

"I wonder when I shall be able to see the Baron again! What is all the rest of society compared to him? And Mrs. Lakesby too. What a perfectly fascinating creature she is! One seems to be living in two worlds at once when she is with one."

Annerly cordially endorsed these praises.

"But about seeing the Baron again," he said, "I do not know when we shall any of us have an opportunity for that after the party at the castle breaks up, for he is going to disappear then into some retirement of his own, where none of us will be able to follow him."

"Good heavens, how horrible! But how long is he to be away?"

"I can't say. I hope he may return sooner or later, that some of us may see him again, but it looks very uncertain. I know he thinks that after having given such extraordinary exhibitions of the occult power he possesses, it would be impossible for him to live again in ordinary society as he did in London last season."

"Where's the impossibility?"

"Partly that his life would be one continuous resistance to importunity on the part of people who would beg for further displays of occult power—which, for various reasons, he would be precluded from giving; but in a greater degree, I think, because he wants to get the principles of occult philosophy considered on their own merits by the thinking world instead of being illuminated by the artificial excitement that fresh displays of occult power would bring about. I know he is fond of saying that what ought to be done now can better be done by such men as Blane and Professor Massilton"—the name was one which Annerly found

rather hard to pronounce in a natural tone —“than by himself.”

“But this is a shocking scandal about Professor Massilton.”

“Of course it is. All that developed since I left the castle, and I hardly know how the Baron takes it. But I gather from Merland that, by some intricate reasoning, the Baron treats what seems the gross unfitness of such a man as the Professor, regarded as the exponent of a new quasi-religious philosophy, as all in the plan somehow. I do not pretend to interpret this.”

“But what is the plan?”

“Books are to be written and some society formed for the propagation of the ideas the Baron has been communicating to us all.”

“If books are to be written I suppose you have your share of the work to do?”

“I trust I may still have some share of it; but when I left Heiligenfels I was rather looking forward to a closer and more important course of study than seems possible for me now—other responsibilities have arisen since then to absorb my energies.”

“Good Heavens! What can have drawn you away from such opportunities as that? At least, I beg your pardon, I have no business to ask you questions of that sort. Only it seems to me as if nothing could be interesting enough to draw one away from following up such an opening as you speak of.”

“It’s very simple, Miss Vaughan. There is only one force that could have been strong enough. But I have long been very deeply in love with a lady whom, till very recently, I had no hope of winning. Since then it has become possible for me to marry her, and I am about to do so.”

Miss Vaughan looked puzzled and surprised.

“Why should that put an end to your friendship with the Baron? Does the lady object to your going on with occultism? Is she prejudiced?”

Annerly laughed. He was too happy to see any but the amusing side of the idea.

“No, she is not prejudiced at all. But occult science in its highest aspects is a very jealous mistress. A man must give himself

up to that entirely and have no other ties in the world if he would succeed in that career."

As he spoke he noticed a shadow on Lucy's face, and it occurred to him that she might put a construction on his words which Merland would perhaps be very sorry to have her put. After a brief hesitation he added,

"I hope that the change in my plans will only mean a change in the nature of my usefulness in this matter. I may not be able to retire into the kind of monastic seclusion that would be necessary for my own personal development—for the acquisition, in some small degree, of the faculties we have seen the Baron exercise,—but the study of occultism, the interpretation of the pursuit to the world, and the task of elucidating the truth for the benefit of others, will be open to me as much as ever. I am not at all sure but that I may be of more real service that way—that anybody may be—than by obtaining personal development for himself."

"Mrs. Lakesby has got wonderful powers and she has not gone into a monastery."

"She was born with them. But the truth

is that 'powers' are not the objects at which a true student of occultism should aim. He should seek a comprehension of nature and the adaptation of his own nature to the highest development possible for him."

The conversation went on for some time longer in a vague and desultory manner. Then Miss Vaughan said,

"Tell me, Mr. Annerly: suppose some one else you cared about was in doubt whether to be an occult monk or to lead an ordinary life in the world in the way he would most wish to, what would you advise him to do?"

She spoke gravely and earnestly, and Annerly was thrilled with admiration for the thought that he perceived working in her mind. But his chief anxiety was to be sure that nothing he said should rob Merland of the opening that might be developing before him.

"Miss Vaughan, my own act that I have told you of is the most eloquent answer I can give. I know this much, that if a man really loves a woman there is no misery possible for him so bad as having to give her up. - I do not believe that he could ever do

any good in the path such men as Baron von Mondstern tread, if he took to that as a *pis aller* when the path he would have trodden should be closed to him. I would only warn such a friend as you imagine against falling victim to a caprice. A real love once formed would be a fact in his life that it would be useless and fatal to oppose."

But he could not translate these abstract theories into a direct application in the absence of any fuller declaration of her meaning from Miss Vaughan, and as he went on talking up the air about the whole subject he failed to revive the brightness and vivacity of his companion. In the beginning of their talk he felt sure she had intended to give him some specific message for Merland. Now he could not elicit this from her by any devices. He even talked of perhaps going back to Heiligenfels for a little while before returning to settle his own affairs. Could he take any messages from her to any of them there? She would have her best love given to Mrs. Lakesby, she said, and to Mrs. Miller too, of course; "and you must tell the Baron I shall die if—but

no. He is too great to be talked to in any frivolous nonsensical manner. It is hardly worth while for you to mention having seen me at all. We are going down to Devonshire to-morrow or next day. You will write to me if anything more of special interest takes place—won't you, Mr. Annerly?"

"Of course I will do anything you wish," Annerly said, now profoundly annoyed at the turn things had taken, and with himself.

"I like engaged men, Mr. Annerly; one can make such friends of them. Now mind, it is not a mere promise to be made to-day and forgotten to-morrow—this about writing to me. Write fully, will you, the day after to-morrow to Devonshire? Something is sure to have happened by that time. And when are you going over?"

"What? To Germany?"

"Yes."

"I had not fixed any definite day. I would have gone any day if there had been any special service to render you by doing so."

"How could that be?—what nonsense!

But you will be in town for the next two or three days, in any case?"

"Certainly."

"That's all right. I have got your address, have I not? Is there any hurry for you to go? Well, it is so kind of you to have come, and I am so much obliged. By-the-bye, Mr. Annerly, I do hope you will be happy in your marriage."

He had already risen to go, and was saying good-bye, when she thus gave him her good wishes. The reference enabled him to make one more covert allusion to the subject he was most deeply engrossed with for the moment.

"Miss Vaughan, I believe I am going to be happy—happy as it has not seemed possible for me to dream of being for several years past; and though, of all at the Castle, I perhaps had the best chance of acceptance by the Baron in more intimate relations than those any of us have yet had with him, the prospect I speak of fully reconciles me—more than reconciles me—to the loss of that chance. I do not think women realise, in all cases, what they may sometimes be to men."

Miss Vaughan looked at him full in the eyes, earnestly and thoughtfully, as he spoke. Annerly waited for her to answer, and she seemed to pause, as if to determine what she should say, but at last she smiled slightly, and held out her hand. "I do not wonder you have been successful, Mr. Annerly, you can plead eloquently," she said, and with that he had to take his departure.

Across the serenity of his own contentment a streak of really acute distress penetrated Annerly's feelings as he walked away. He had been guilty by his own clumsiness in some way of having checked Miss Vaughan's impulse in Merland's favour, which must have been the motive governing her in sending for him. It was a beautiful thought, evidently, which had disturbed her intention. She had been for the first time struck with the notion that the gift of her love would be a fatal gift for her lover; that a finer destiny might await him if he were not turned aside from the opportunity held out to him by the Baron. And she had drawn back at the very brink of a decisive step, leaving him, Annerly, quite powerless

to restore her to her former state of mind,—to unsay the few words that had turned her aside from her spontaneous movement. Was he, who had reviled Merland for thinking of love in preference to the occult life, going not only to be a backslider himself in face of the supreme temptation, but the destroyer of his friend's happiness? Ought he to tell Merland all that had passed, perhaps unsettling his mind again for no purpose? or should he be guilty of hiding from him a state of facts which Merland would perhaps be indignant with him for hiding if he understood the situation? It was altogether very perplexing. He thought of writing quite frankly to Miss Vaughan, and pleading for Merland in his unconscious absence. After all she would not be surprised to hear that he knew what had passed in the conservatory. As this struck him, he wondered that he had not been more frank in the conversation that had just taken place. He felt deeply contrite and more distressed than at any moment since his reconciliation with Miriam.

It would be a relief to go and talk the matter over with her that evening. Her

bright woman's wit might perhaps suggest a way out of the dilemma. He was too little inclined for casual conversation with acquaintances to visit his club, so he dined at a restaurant, and walked up to Miss Jameson's, so as to put through the time which had to elapse before he would be expected there for the evening. He would think no more of the perplexity about Miss Vaughan, he decided during his meal, till he could talk it over with Miriam. She should have the credit of suggesting the course to be taken to rescue his friend from the peril to which his, Annerly's, awkwardness had exposed him. It would all come right in the end. Out of what an awful entanglement had *his* affairs righted themselves at last. Prone by his recent thinking to attribute more importance than he used formerly to give them to hidden influence on the psychic plane, he began to speculate as to how far it would be reconcileable with occult science if he assumed that the abnormal intensity of his love for Miriam had been an efficient cause in bringing about the circumstances under which she had been restored to him. The

theory would not cover all the facts; but he amused himself as he walked along by working it out as far as possible, and took pleasure in thinking how he would set it before Miriam with much fantastic detail in the course of their talks together that evening.

“Miss Seaford at home?” he muttered as a mere matter of form when the door was opened, as he stepped into the hall.

“Oh, if you please, sir,” said the servant, “Miss Seaford has gone to bed with a very bad headache, and says would you kindly excuse her to-night?”

The check was unexpected. Annerly had told her that afternoon that he would be sensible of anxiety sometimes as he approached her door lest the happiness of finding her ready to receive him should be too intense to be real—but on this occasion the notion of being disappointed of seeing her had not crossed his mind. He felt a great chill at the heart as he stood hesitating on the door-mat.

“I am very sorry to hear she is not well. It is very sudden.” The servant stood

silent, and had no further remark to make.

"Is Miss Jameson at home?"

The girl seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then replied with much emphasis, "No, sir, she's gone out for the evening."

There was nothing for Annerly to do under the circumstances but to go away.

"Tell Miss Seaford, if you please," he said, "how greatly I regret to hear she is not well, and that I will call to inquire after her early to-morrow afternoon."

With that he went away, and Susan, the maid-servant, went in to Miss Jameson, who was in a very agitated state in the drawing-room, and reported the course she had taken.

"I thought, most likely, you wouldn't want to see nobody to night, m'm, so I told Mr. Annerly you was out."

"Quite right, Susan," Miss Jameson answered; "I'm rather upset and I do not want to see any one."

Neither Miss Jameson nor her niece had been confiding in Susan, but the elder lady had not Miriam's faculty of reserve, and her

agitation had been very apparent in her little household.

With a sense of dejection and anxiety that he told himself over and over again was exaggerated and unjustifiable, Annerly made his way back to his chambers. The elasticity of spirits which had made the walk from town up to the Regent's Park a pleasure, had given place now to a lassitude which drove him to take refuge in a hansom, and the evening was all before him when he lit his lamp and sat down in his arm-chair with a book, the perusal of which, for that matter, invited him as little as any other occupation for the time that he could think of.

The rooms he inhabited were in a large house altogether built for chambers in the Adelphi region. His own little suite consisted simply of two; and, as he never took regular meals there, except the breakfast which was brought to him, under an arrangement with the porter, he had no other service available than that of the *femme de ménage*, who set his quarters to rights every morning. His outer door bore

his name painted on it, and a little sliding-panel to indicate whether the tenant was "out" or "in." He left this standing unaltered at "out" as he entered, not that any visitors were likely to disturb his solitude, but from a general impulse to shut himself up, and ward off the remotest chance of commonplace companionship.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CRISIS OF A LIFE.

THERE was a letter box affixed to the outer door, and he had been at home about an hour or so, trying to shake off the depression he felt, arguing that sensitiveness of this kind to a momentary disappointment was idiotic and absurd, but failing to recover the elastic hopefulness of the last few days, when he heard a letter drop in. For some time he did not go in search of it. The circumstances were not such as could leave room for any letter from Miriam, and correspondence relating to any other matter could wait. He forgot that a letter had come, after a while. He sat down and tried to write, but the effort was distasteful and

unproductive. Then he conceived the notion of writing to the Baron on the subject of the interview he had had with Miss Vaughan. That would perhaps be the best thing to do in that difficulty, and loyalty to his friend when he addressed himself to this task roused his energies. It would be necessary to describe the situation very fully to put the Baron in a position to decide, whether the statement should be passed on to Merland or not, so a long letter was called for. He had been at work on this for some time, and the later hours of the evening had already come on, when there came a knock at his outer door. "Who on earth can that be?" he thought, conscious at the same moment of a strange sensation sweeping all over the surface of his body as it were, nothing that could distinctly be called apprehension or dread, but,—“Bah! what a nervous fool I am to-night,” he thought; “What’s the matter with me? But what do I care who it is—I do not want to be disturbed.” And then he remembered that his panel marked “out,” and that any acquaintances who might have looked in at

his rooms in passing, on the chance of finding him in, would notice that and go away. Letters could be put in the box, and parcels could be left with the porter. He turned to his writing again. And then,—the knock did not come again as at first, but in some way the sound of the knock seemed vividly repeated in his inner consciousness. It suddenly reminded him of the inner voice that had called him upstairs on the night when he visited the Baron in the turret-chamber.

“I’m upset and stupid to-night—I’d better go to bed,” he thought; but now he was impelled to go and see if there was anybody outside. As he opened the inner door he noticed the letter, which had come some hours previously, in the letter-box. He took this out, though he did not stop to look at it for the moment, and then he opened the door.

A very well-known friend stood outside. Annerly started with pleasurable surprise.

“Baron von Mondstern!”

“An unexpected visitor, of course,” said the Baron, with his gentle, sympathetic smile

and kindly, mellow voice; "but not an unwelcome one, I trust, even at this late hour?"

"More welcome than any words can tell," Annerly replied with enthusiasm, as the Baron entered. He closed both doors and motioned his visitor to the easy-chair.

"Sit down there and tell me what good fortune has brought you. It never crossed my mind that you would be leaving Heiligenfels for the present."

Annerly was not disconcerted by the fact that the Baron had not offered to shake hands. The custom was one that he had often spoken of as inconvenient for any one very sensitive to so-called "magnetic" influences, and his friends at the castle had long ceased to associate his own peculiar modes of greeting, which did not generally include the touch of the hand, with any want of kindly feeling or courtesy on his part.

Annerly threw down his letter on the writing-table without looking at it, and turned round his writing-chair to face his visitor.

“Do you find the room too hot? At this time if you are in London, lamps in a room soon make it oppressive. I will open the window a little more.”

“I do not care which way it is. I am not very sensitive to heat and cold.”

When Annerly turned back from opening the window the Baron had removed the soft felt hat he wore on entering. The lamp-light shone upon his rich brown hair and beard and broad clear forehead; and the deep blue eyes which always caught the attention of any one who looked at him seemed to Annerly to exhale a soothing influence of some kind in a greater degree even than was usual.

“Now let us have a quiet talk,” said the Baron; “there is a good deal to be said between us, for you are coming to a sort of crisis in your life.”

Annerly, as he listened, felt that the disappointment of that evening in reference to Miriam had some association with the crisis. The shadow of a new separation from her lay already on his heart. The prospect of this was not in his mind yet as a definite

conception, but he knew that the Baron had something to break to him. And yet for the moment he contemplated the new menace with a sort of unnatural composure, as if he were looking on at something happening to a third person.

"It is about Miriam?" he said.

"It is about her, certainly, and other things as well. You know, already, that a human life includes more than the physical facts occurring in one of its objective manifestations. At the castle, since you left, they have been busy with the investigation of this idea, as perhaps Merland has told you."

"In some general terms only. I have been thinking that, perhaps, they were getting on to discoveries which were not available to be shared with any one who, like myself, had fallen back into worldly interests."

"None of our friends at Heiligenfels are deeply initiated as yet. Nothing has taken place that need have been concealed from you, but part of it has been withheld from altogether sympathetic motives. They did

not want to tell you about your past Karma because they thought it would disturb your present happiness, but the time has come when it is useless to be reticent any longer."

"My Karma! Has that been under examination?"

"Yes. If you have not been thinking out the problems of Karma a great deal, you would be surprised at the visions Mrs. Lakesby has obtained of a certain personality that has been identified as a previous objective manifestation of your own. The author of the Karma now governing your life—you yourself under different conditions—enjoyed life but too well. You shall eventually get such details as they have written down, but for the moment I need only tell you, in general terms, that you were endowed with extraordinary personal advantages which hurried you into much temptation, that you revelled in the love of several women, whose lives were thus partly wrecked through your fault, that the circumstances that have made the love of woman a sorrow to you in this incarnation, rather than a delight as for-

merly, were due to the inevitable reaction of the past."

Annerly only gave vent to a half-articulate ejaculation of interest. The Baron went on—

"Your friends thought that their vision might have been delusive, because you had just announced the resumption of your engagement with the woman you love, and this seemed to discredit the past indication. They did not foresee that Karma might be so relentless as to involve you in a crisis of further suffering."

"In what way am I to lose her again?" Annerly asked, calmly, as if he were in some condition of psychic anæsthesia. He knew that he was under torture, but he did not seem to feel it for the moment.

"I'll tell you directly; but I'll tell you something else first. The visions they got from Mrs. Lakesby did not quite cover all the ground as regards yourself. They divined the nature of the bad Karma that has made you suffer, but they had no full view of the good Karma of a different kind which is latent in your nature; and for the sake of

which, to be candid with you, I am drawn into such strong sympathy with you. For now I may tell you that the passionate love you feel for the lady you would wish to absorb into your life, is not itself an emotion which claims my sympathy; still less the more prosperous passions of your previous life. The man in you, who is my friend, has but, as I regard the matter, been temporarily obscured by the overgrowth of his lower nature during the Roman incarnation, and by its sad after-growth in this. Mrs. Lakesby's vision did not give your friends the complete clue to the comprehension of your character. Going back to a still earlier period they would have found you already developed to a very considerable extent as a student and devotee of Nature's mysteries, an unselfish enthusiast for the cause of spiritual knowledge, a lover of the higher principles in all humanity rather than of the lower principles in one representative thereof. That enthusiasm is all latent in your nature still, my friend; the knowledge you once possessed will, without very much difficulty, relatively to its magnitude, be re-

coverable ; your consciousness may again be restored to the better self from which, for a time, it has been exiled."

"As usual," Annerly said, "your influence reasserts itself, and I feel another being when I am talking with you."

"It is merely that I comprehend and can stimulate your latent higher nature. The loftier emotions you refer to are from yourself as much as the stormy passions that have partly stifled them. At the best I can help you to realise what lies below the surface, and your old Karma fully entitles you to my help in this respect. And now, what I mean by the crisis in your life is this. You must conquer your lower nature on the plane of your lower nature, and the final suffering which is now about to exhaust your lower Karma must be honestly met when, so to speak, you are broad awake in the physical life. Just now you are not sensitive, as it were, to the love-pangs you have been experiencing."

"It seems to me as if we were talking about some one else. If, as I understand, I

am to lose Miriam again, I should have thought I must have gone mad."

"You are entitled not to go mad this time. But all the same the feeling deadened in you for the moment will reassert itself. And now you may read your letter."

"What letter? This?" turning to the table and taking up the letter he had brought in when the Baron came. "Does this bear on what you are saying?"

"You will see."

It was from Professor Massilton, and ran as follows:

"MY DEAR ANNERLY,

"I am quite sure you are a man of honour, and no man of honour would take a mean advantage of a woman. So I am going to write what less straightforward people would think a very strange letter.

"We are both in love with Miriam Seaford. I should have been married to her before now if I had not been fettered by a miserable marriage, which is no marriage really. But our bond, under the circumstances, could only be a loose one. Under the impulse of certain impressions at the

time, Miriam shook it off. I had to acquiesce, much to my regret. If you have ever thought of me as a seducer and a deserter you have totally misunderstood my position.

"Now I am going to be free of my old entanglement. I am thus enabled to offer Miriam regular marriage, and have hastened to do so.

"I find she has re-engaged herself to you. But I believe she has done this for your sake rather than for her own.

"Now if she prefers to marry you, with full liberty of choice in the matter, I, as an honourable man, am ready to bow to her decision. I am quite sure that you, an equally honourable man, will be quite ready to bow to her decision, if it is the other way.

"For the moment you hold her promise, and I do not suppose that she will break that promise, if you hold her to it; but you will not be the man I take you for if you force a woman to marry you against her inclination, by holding a promise given under different circumstances *in terrorem* over her conscience.

"I have seen her and have her permission to put the matter thus before you.

"All I propose is—let her have liberty of choice. A line from you, saying that, as far as you are concerned, she has that liberty of choice, is all I suggest.

"May the man she loves best be her husband, whoever has to suffer of us two. Will you join me in that wish ?

"Ever yours truly,

"ARTHUR MASSILTON."

"As I said," went on the Baron, when Annerly had finished reading the letter, "you will have to conquer your lower nature on the plane to which it belongs. The situation will hurt you more to-morrow than it does to-night, when your consciousness is partly on a higher plane ; but you will not forget the feelings of the higher plane, and they will help you to get the victory. And remember above all this—that you need not associate the idea of humiliation with suffering of this kind. You need not refer it to any other person. What you have to go through is the last spasm of your old Karma created by your own act. And

now, I believe, your intuitions are so fully awakened that you will see, as clearly as I do, the rest of what I mean."

"Yes: you mean that recognition of the truth in this respect closes the operation of Karma, and is the escape from its torment. As long as the inevitable is resisted its effects are aggravated—thrown into manifestation.

"Just so. The crisis will be past when you can look back upon it in that spirit."

"But it is inconceivable that I can bear to lose Miriam again with this strange benumbed insensibility."

"Quite so; the insensibility is merely temporary, but it may help you to realise that the subsequent pain will be but temporary. And now again I ask you, why, in the absence of a higher consciousness, men cling to the torments of their Karma?"

"Because they fail to see that the pain itself is a function of the lower nature. The difficulty will be to realise, in such a case as mine, that it is of the lower, for love is not of that."

"Selfish love is of that—above all things

it is of that. Not of the grossest animal nature—I do not mean that—but it is acquisitive—exclusive in its operation; the love that would embrace its object. Unselfish love merely seeks the happiness of the person loved—not his or her companionship.”

“The only thing to know is—with whom she will be happiest?”

“Ask her the question fairly, abide willingly by her answer, and you will have conquered. And now I must be going. I have come but to see you.”

The Baron as he spoke did not rise to go, but he fixed his eyes intently on Annerly, who then felt for the first time that there was something abnormal about his presence.

“You have learned enough in conversation with me at Heiligenfels not to be too much surprised at meeting some of the queer experiences your occult studies have shown you to be possible. Do not fall into the mistake of supposing that this is not I who have been talking to you because presently you will be conscious of it no longer. The real *I* has been here, and the

best token of my presence will be found in the thoughts with which you will be armed for the strife of your coming battle. The mere outward phantasmagoria on the plane of the physical sense is wanted no more."

Was it a mist that came over Annerly's eyes as the Baron spoke, or did the form that he had seen a corporeal reality a few moments previously, and with whom he had been conversing all this time, undergo some change? It was blurred and indistinct before him, though still in the easy chair, where the Baron had been sitting—from which he had never moved. Annerly in his excitement leaned forward, gazing at the fading apparition. Sitting as he did, in his own writing-chair partly turned round, his face came down as he thus bent forward to the level of his left arm, stretched out upon the table. A sense of bewilderment overcame him,—a tumult of emotion that he could not interpret. The easy-chair was quite vacant now, there was no trace of his visitor left,—there was no trace of benumbed insensibility to pain in his heart. His whole

nature seemed torn and throbbing in a passion of agony. His face was bowed upon the table, and his hand clutched an open letter, and, man as he was, his breast was bursting with convulsive sobs.

"What does it mean?" he almost shrieked aloud, as he sprang up into an upright position.

But in a silent and empty room there was no reply.

"Miriam, Miriam!" he moaned in despair, "have you driven me mad?"

But he remembered as he spoke that the Baron had said he was entitled not to go mad.

The capacity for suffering on the plane of his own personality had fully come back to him, but he had lost no sentence, no idea that had been uttered in the conversation just passed. He remembered even his own words. He remembered that a little while ago he had been talking of this letter and its contents with perfect composure. He remembered that he had said the question was with whom she would be happiest, and

again he said so, "That shall be the only question; but oh, my Miriam, oh God, if it would suffice that I might merely die for you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ANNERLY'S RETURN.

ABOUT a week later the little party at Heiligenfels were gathered in the evening on the terrace after dinner, their favourite resort, except on the rare occasions when cloudy weather during the day made the evenings chilly, and Blane had been reading aloud some chapters he had already written of a book he had in preparation on certain aspects of occult science. The anticipations Mrs. Miller had been expressing as to the great success this book ought to achieve, by reason of bringing rational explanations to bear upon some of the more familiar though quite uninterpreted phenomena of mesmer-

ism and clairvoyance, had been received by the author with gloomy distrust, for he rarely took rose-coloured views of any enterprise depending on his own achievements.

"I am a raw student of these subjects, on which I am professing to teach the world. While I am putting these pages together I have the Baron to refer to for the elucidation of difficulties, and for the whole theory or doctrine on which they rest. Where shall we all be when we cannot turn to him for help any longer?"

"Happy thought," said Mrs. Miller: "suppose he takes a quiet country-house near London, and does not go away out of our reach at all."

"If," said the Baron, "you were to send a servant to Cologne, to do some business for you, would it be a happy thought on his part if he were to take lodgings over a wine-shop, and not come back?"

"It is not easy," said Captain Jem, "to think of you in the light of somebody else's servant, but it ought to be easy for us, I think, to look on you as knowing best what is the right thing to do. But then, ladies

always know better than the people who know best."

"Will somebody please hit the person who spoke last?" said Mrs. Miller.

"Anything else to oblige you, Mrs. Miller," said Merland; "but he's too big and savage."

"If I'm really wanted again," said the Baron, "depend upon it I shall be sent. But, in truth, the work to be done in the world as a sequel to the beginnings that have been set on foot here must be done, if at all, by others and not by me. All healthy growth of the mind must develop from within, and the same holds good of great movements of thought in society at large. The penetrating insight into Nature which occult science affords is not a gift to be bestowed on great masses of people by external benevolence. It can only accrue to people by the cultivation of their faculties, and by attracting them into the right channels of thought and study. Now the nucleus of ardent students which we have constituted here is quite large enough to grow, and to provoke such a ferment of

thought in society as may really lead to great results, if the time proves to be ripe."

"I think the time may be ripe," Blane said, "but perhaps not the nucleus you speak of. At least, I only speak for myself."

"I once knew a man in China," said Captain Miller, "who said he only knew one word of Chinese. But he had taken a fort with it."

"Let us have the details, Captain Jem," said the Baron; "I daresay there is a moral to your story."

"The word was 'wailo,' which means 'get out,' 'go to the devil'—a very popular sort of word in China. My friend had been taking a morning walk during our campaign on the Peiho, and stumbled quite by accident on a bit of a Chinese battery, open at the back and masked by trees. It would have been death to run, so he jumped in among the Chinamen and sang out 'Wailo!' They thought there was a regiment behind him and bolted like hares."

"But now please interpret your parable, Jem," said Mrs. Miller.

"Dear Mrs. Miller," said Blane, "I'll

interpret it for you and cry *peccavi* at the same time. Whatever you know, whatever you can do, trust pluckily to it and do the best you can with it. Of course Jem is perfectly right. I should not have thought 'wailo' enough to say under the circumstances and should have let the Chinamen slaughter me."

"Jem will be the best captain of our nucleus after all," said Merland.

"Say the bo'sun," suggested the hero of the moment.

"If there was one person still amongst us," said Mrs. Miller, "who is among us no longer, there would never be much need of considering who should be captain."

"Meaning Professor Massilton," said Blane, a little coldly.

"Our masterful Consul," said Mrs. Lakesby.

"By-the-bye," said the Baron, "I got some papers from London to-day that I want to show you all. I brought them down before dinner."

He went back into the drawing-room for a moment and returned with two or three newspapers.

"The Philistines have fallen on the Professor already and have been enjoying themselves greatly at his expense."

The Baron then read aloud one of the most offensive of the articles that had been written on "Biology and Broomsticks." The pungency of its sarcasm was altogether at the Professor's expense. The audience on the terrace was indignant and irritated.

"The Professor," said the Baron, "is a well-known man, with a scientific reputation to make a good mark for scoffers. He, of course, must expect to bear the brunt of the first gush of contempt which ignorance and bigotry pours out against new ideas, whether they are altogether new, or only very old ones come round again."

"How will such a proud man as the Professor," Mrs. Lakesby suggested, "bear to be abused like that?"

"He bears it very coolly," said the Baron. "I had a letter from him about this very article and some others, in which he expresses, indeed, very acute annoyance, but not on his own account. I will read you a part of the letter"—taking a few letters from

his pocket, from which he selected one. "He writes :—' I am chiefly annoyed about all this on account of all you people at Heiligenfels. I hoped to have been an element of strength in the work you have in hand, and I have merely brought a shower of brickbats at your heads. It is in that reflection that lies the mortification for myself. Personally, I have the hide of a rhinoceros in regard to all newspaper attacks. These things hurt some people. They simply do not hurt me. I am not stoical; I merely don't mind. But others may not be like myself, and I fear especially that Blane, who is a very delicate-natured, sensitive fellow, may suffer pain at all this ribaldry in regard to a cause to which he is devoting himself. There is simply no help for it that I can see. Meanwhile I only hope I may serve as lightning-conductor to attract all this idiotic nonsense, and convey it harmlessly to oblivion.' "

" Well done, Professor," said Mrs. Miller. " As for the fool who wrote the article you have just read, I wish he was —— "

" Able to appreciate his folly," interrupted

the Baron. "We will not send out unholy wishes to breed in the astral light."

"I am grateful to him," said Blane.

"What on earth do you mean, Willy?"

"He has been the cause of the writing of that letter the Baron has just read. After all, it may be the Professor who will suffer from co-operation with us, more than our cause from association with him."

"I am glad you take that view of it," said the Baron, "because in the long-run I think that will be the case. Of course, the Professor would be still more useful to the cause of truth than he is likely to be, even if he were perfect in all respects; but for any man who can do good service I do not think we should hold aloof merely because he can't do better. After all, what we want to recommend to the world are certain ideas—not certain men. It may be a good thing that people should see that, if these are true, it does not in the least matter who utters them."

"What are you making a point at, Mrs. Lakesby?" asked Merland. "What do you see?"

All of them were used to the little signs of manner, the peculiar fixed look in the eyes, that betokened the perception of some appearance invisible to the rest by the clairvoyante.

“Nothing,” she said. “I’ve got a feeling. Who is there coming here, Baron?” she asked.

“Are your nerves sensitive to an approaching presence? I should not be surprised if we had a visitor this evening—or rather a returning friend.”

“Annerly,” she said. “He’s coming up the road to the castle.”

There were exclamations of surprise and interest—not so much due to the fact that Mrs. Lakesby had scented his approach by means of her strange extra senses—for the guests at the castle had long grown used to taking abnormal manifestations of one kind and another very coolly—as at the return itself of their absent friend. In a general way the Baron had made them acquainted with the course of events, communicated to him, as they presumed, by letters from the person concerned. They

knew that the engagement Annerley had formed had been broken off, that its rupture had involved some act of heroism on his part, and that the circumstances were altogether of a painful nature, so that it would be better to make no reference to the incident whenever they should see him again.

"I suppose," Mrs. Miller said, "that he will take up the occult life altogether now?"

"Probably," said the Baron; "and I may as well add that, while I believe Mrs. Lakesby's vision of a previous incarnation he has been through, to have been quite trustworthy, Annerly's natural affinities for occult study seem to me to point to some other probably still earlier incarnation in which he had already advanced a great way on the path. Unhappily it is easy to slip back at any time before the further shore of real knowledge is attained."

"I'm heartily glad we are to have Annerly with us again," his friend Merland said. "He and I have been so much together, and I know him so well, that of course I am very much attached to him, but

I think you all took a liking to him in spite of his shy ways."

This was very warmly confirmed. But the Baron intimated that Annerly would not stay at the castle this time.

"I hope you will not think me too mysterious, but Annerly will be going to-morrow on a journey I have ventured to suggest to him. He merely stays with us for one night. If you like, Merland, you could come with us in the morning, for I mean to go with him part of the way."

The programme, thus arranged, indicated so plainly that Annerly had taken, or was taking, some decisive step in the direction of devoting himself to the great pursuit, that his arrival shortly afterwards was invested with even keener interest than it would have excited otherwise. Old Franz came in person to announce to the Baron that Mr. Annerly had reached the castle, and had gone into the library.

"Ask him to join us here," said the Baron, and then Merland and Mrs. Miller went into the drawing-room to meet him. In this way they saw him first in the fully-lighted room,

and were both startled by a strange and undefinable change that seemed to have come over his face in the short time he had been absent. He was aged in some way, and at the same time his manner had more confidence and dignity than it had been marked by formerly. He greeted his friends cheerfully, and Merland with great warmth of feeling, but he did not pretend to any gaiety of manner. On the other hand he betrayed no nervous embarrassment, though the situation—as they all knew that his adventures, while away, had been of a very stirring character—might have been a little awkward.

“Why didn’t you come in time for dinner?” Mrs. Miller asked.

“I had many preparations to make before leaving London. I have come very early, really, rather than very late, for if I had not travelled straight through I should have only reached here to-morrow.”

“Then you did not sleep at Cologne?”

“No.”

There were further inquiries as to whether he had dined, and so forth, but he wanted

nothing, and merely dropped into a vacant chair on the terrace as if he had never been away.

The Baron had not told the circle at the castle of any circumstances which connected Annerly's affairs with those of the other absentee; so Mrs. Miller asked presently, without being at all aware that she was treading on delicate ground, whether Annerly had seen the Professor in London.

"Yes," Annerly answered with composure, "only a day or two before I left."

"How does he take the infamous articles that are being written about him in the papers?"

"Very coolly, I think. He's a very strong man—the Professor. Besides, his private affairs engage his attention very closely just now."

There was a good deal more talk on this subject and on the probable authorship of the stories that had been put in circulation. Mrs. Miller had not at first realised where the responsibility for this almost certainly might be placed.

"How wicked and treacherous of him!" she cried, referring to Sir John Hexton.

"When a piece of mischief is done," said the Baron, "it is no consequence, except to himself, who has done it. A world that does not realise the operation of Karma is needlessly alarmed lest evil-doers will not be punished. Nobody can punish them so certainly as they do that for themselves."

"After they're dead? Well, I daresay you're right in theory, but I think it's a pity some people should have to wait."

"The greatest pity for them," said Annerly. "It is better to get disagreeable things over at once."

"And then, thousands of years hence, when Sir John Hexton may be doing penance for his sins in some other incarnation, I shan't be there to look on and say serve him right."

"Let us hope," said the Baron, "you will be better employed."

"——in doing penance for your own," added Captain Jem, pensively.

The conversation amongst the group at large kept, in this way, to the surface of

things. It was not till Annerly and Merland were alone together in Annerly's room, when the general separation for the night had taken place, that any intimate explanations were given by Annerly concerning the past few days.

"I've gone through a great deal of experience since I saw you last, Claude, and it seems to me as if a great period of life rather than a few weeks had passed in the interim."

"Tell me as much as you can, old man, and no more than you like. I am sure you have had a frightful time."

"It is all in the day's work. I have been through a great crisis—a great operation in psychic surgery, and I am all the better for it, but a good deal sobered. I could laugh when I look back to the last time I was in this room, and imagined myself ready to enter on the occult life. I think I am ready now—to begin—but I am an entirely changed man. And that is the important thing to explain to you, Claude. The outer facts are not of so much importance. You know I met with Miriam Seaford again and got our

old engagement renewed. I knew, in the bottom of my heart, all the while, that she had taken pity on me rather than anything else, but I was willing to get possession of her on those terms rather than on none. And that was the key to the understanding of the old nature, which I think I have dropped. I was very truly in love, but I had not mastered the A.B.C. of unselfishness in love."

"Good Heavens, Annerly, why you would have had yourself skinned for her at any time."

"Perhaps so, but I would not have willingly surrendered her to another man that she might be happier with him than she could be with me. The intense agony I used to experience in longing for her was all pure selfishness. It was not that I thought she was unhappy, I merely was so myself; and the contemplation of that fact made me miserable. I had got my consciousness in fact altogether seated in my own personality, — to put the thing in occult language. I was living in the lower principles of my nature, quite oblivious of the higher. Now under help and guidance I have succeeded in

making the transfer. The wrench was something quite extraordinary. I have been in distress of mind before, but I never went through any pain to compare with that I was immersed in this time last week, and for a day or two longer."

"But how did the break-off happen then—if you can bear to speak of it?"

"It was Massilton she really wanted to marry,—our Professor. When I found this out the crisis began. When I was able to write and tell her that she was quite free as far as promises to me were concerned—it was determined as to its nature. When I could go to her, as I did before I left London, and bid her good bye, composedly, as a friend not as a lover at all—it was over. She was the only person who showed emotion at our parting."

"But what was this more than a final culmination of the unselfishness which you have always shown in this matter as it seems to me?"

"I should either have not acted as I did—or I should have unsettled my reason in doing so—if it had not been for the

Baron's psychic influence. That is just as plain to me now as if it had held me up from falling over a precipice. The first evening he came to me ——"

"How do you mean came to you? He has never been away from here."

"Never mind the mere occult science of the matter. The real man visited me if in a phantom body, and was as real to me, while with me, as if he had come over by train and steamboat. When I realise what occultism is as regards the training of the soul, the outer machinery of its working on the physical plane seems of no importance. The Baron came to me first this night last week, and he opened my eyes just before the crisis came on to the possibility of consciousness on the higher plane, from which the cravings of the lower do not seem to be of such omnipotent supremacy as they do on that level. Nothing he did saved me from one inevitable pang of suffering, but through this all I realised that it was right to suffer; that through embracing that suffering it could be annihilated, conquered, and put away in the background."

"But *have* you conquered it? Are you really through with it, and contented with the prospect before you?"

"I would not stoop now to examine into the matter. Do I suffer? Do I not suffer? What does it matter? That is not the thing to live for, either way. The life I am passing through is worthless, unless I make it of supreme value by realising its worthlessness. I am, I hope, on the road to do that. To wish to escape from suffering, and be peaceful, content, happy, is still to be living in the lower plane of personality. The higher self within me and that within you—far closer together than we realise while walled off from each other in these physical bodies—cannot suffer; at all events, not in the way we are talking of. To live up into that higher self is to achieve the transfer of consciousness I speak of. I know that sort of language is misty and comfortless, but I am sure you will catch my meaning."

"I realise your meaning quite fully. It seems to me, in my small way, I have gone through the change you speak of. I have no thought now of going back into any

other life than this. Sooner or later the Baron ——”

“My dear Claude, your Karma and mine, as you know, are two very different forces. One cloudy day does not spoil a summer, just as one delusive gleam of sunshine does not make a fine season. No two people have to achieve their purification in the same way. For some it may come through happiness and for others through suffering. Don't suppose that you must work out your redemption by the same means I have had to employ. I am no prophet; but still I say that our paths in life, even if they both tend upwards towards an elevation of consciousness unto that higher level of which I spoke, may lie through a very different sort of country.”

“Why are you talking in such enigmas?”

“Because I have no knowledge which enables me to talk in any other way. But take no hasty resolutions of any kind for the present. Wait and see what happens—and now about to-morrow.”

Annerly had already settled with the Baron the time at which they should start,

which was to be early in the morning. He arranged the time at which Merland should join them, and then their talk drifted back to details of what had transpired since they parted. Merland filled up all the blanks of the information he had sent his friend by letter concerning the clairvoyant visions, and learned the full particulars of all that concerned the complication of Annerly's affairs with those of the Professor.

“Outside the infraction of certain moral laws—growing rather perhaps out of our marriage institutions, than having themselves an absolute existence—there has been nothing to blame in their conduct. The Professor never meant to be unfaithful to his engagements. The union between them was a genuine marriage in all but the name. But it is next to impossible to comment on other people's conduct. Except in glaring cases one should never try. The real hidden motives are undiscernible nearly always.”

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE CONSERVATORY AGAIN.

NEXT morning the Baron and his two companions walked down the hill together, crossed the river in a small boat, and mingled with the little crowd of pleasure-seeking tourists on the steamboat pier at Schlessig. There they got one of the boats going up the Rhine, and went up a few stations to a place at which Annerly was going to take the train. Nothing had been said as to his destination, and Merland felt that it would be indiscreet to ask any questions.

They all had a frugal breakfast together at a riverside hotel, and then went to the station to see Annerly off. The talk during

the whole of this time had been on abstract subjects. It was only as they stood together in the railway waiting-room, Annerly having got his ticket for some unknown place in his pocket, that Merland realised, with a blank, rather forlorn feeling, that he was losing his friend for a very indefinite period.

"It's hard to part with you, Geordie, in this final sort of way. We've been together, off and on, for a long while."

Annerly looked at the Baron, and the Baron at him, both with grave understanding in the eyes. Already there were common thoughts quick to arise between them, which no third person could readily follow. Then, after a little hesitation and grasping Merland's hand, his friend said gently—

"It won't be for long, Claude, in any case, and you shall certainly hear from me."

Merland felt the separation all the more for these few words, but nothing further was said on either side to show emotion. The noisy glass doors on to the platform were opened, the train announced, and, with a simple "Good-bye," Annerly went on with

the other passengers, while Merland and the Baron strolled away back to the river.

"There goes Annerly," said Merland, as they caught sight of the train speeding on its way, at a turn of the road, "shooting away into a new life. Dear old boy! I hope it will be a brighter one for him and a better than the one he is leaving. That has been a rough time on the whole."

"It has been a period of purification for him, of keen suffering through the effect of old Karma, compressed into narrow limits; but the progeny of the Flaccus they have told you of, have ceased to exist. The Annerly from whom you have just parted is the successor of a nobler and earlier self than that. If possible, I will procure a vision for our seeress which shall show you the earlier self of which I speak; but now I want to talk to you of another topic."

Merland felt that the motive with which the Baron had desired his company that morning was now to be made manifest, for hitherto there had been nothing that had passed, while the three had been together,

which explained the purpose of their expedition.

“I want to talk to you, for a little, about yourself, for I know that you have not been without aspirations, which prompted you to court the trials which Annerly is about to confront. You, too, have felt the attraction towards the higher spiritual life that you vaguely appreciate, and one glimpse of which indeed, if I mistake not, you even enjoyed. Is not that so?”

“Certainly it is so,” Merland answered, confidently. “The glimpse you speak of came to me at a moment of painful excitement, when I did not appreciate it as fully as I should now. I am more than ready to follow your lead into the pursuits in which you have conquered your own—if I may put it that way without disguise—your own exaltation above ordinary men.”

“You are ready to give up hopes of ordinary earthly happiness for the chance of attaining, across much trial and suffering, the opportunity of benefiting your fellow creatures on a higher plane of activity than that to which you properly belong?”

“I don’t want to put the matter in any way which seems to make out my aspirations nobler than they are. I do not at present understand how I should benefit anybody else by leading what we have come to call the occult life—by earning, if possible, exceptional knowledge and acquiring abnormal power. But I have got a clearly defined feeling that that is the best sort of life to lead, anyhow, and I wish to lead it. If it brings about opportunities of doing good to others I shall be very glad.”

“You see,” the Baron said, “that the situation is this: we must do everything of this sort with our eyes open. Suppose I could give you reason to believe that you are not driven into the occult life by the stress of any disappointment in this one really,—that the dearest desires you have formed in your heart might after all be realised, provided you made efforts to accomplish them,—while, on the other hand, if you forbore from doing that, that you might throw yourself into a career that might lead to a rapid evolution of your higher spiritual nature, but would certainly

for the time being be one of self-denial and painful effort,—what choice would you make?”

Merland made no immediate reply because the Baron's language seemed so suggestive that the alternatives he set forth were not of a kind to be hastily dealt with.

“That is a complicated idea,” he said.
“Because ——”

He found it difficult to state the case in an abstract form, but still shrank from changing the tone of the conversation.

“Well, the thing strikes me this way. If I myself am really the only person to be considered, I would rather constitute myself your pupil, if that is possible, than attempt to recover any sort of happiness of the kind I was aiming at before I understood your position, so far as I do, which is not much. But ——”

“You are quite right to hesitate in the way you do. Our lives are rarely quite isolated from those of other human beings on our own plane. But I do not want to talk in enigmas. The case seems to me one in which you are not really entitled to

put aside the duties of the plane in life to which you belong till you are quite sure that they do not link you with it decisively. Annerly had no such duties. On the contrary, the renunciation of the ties which chiefly bound him to the world had itself become the highest and only duty he owed the world. And I will tell you more: your Karma does not claim that you should quench your alliance with the world in suffering. Just as it would be very wrong of me to try and beguile any unqualified neophyte into the toilsome path of occult progress by holding a glittering bait before him, so it would be wrong for me to dissuade you from attempting whatever your strength may enable you to strive for. But I want you to realise that, as long as a smooth path leads up-hill the way you are going, no one is bound to get off it to walk in the stones and ruts at the side."

Still, without direct reference to the character of the worldly happiness Merland had been aiming at during the earlier part of his visit to the castle, the conversation went on interspersed with digressions on the

general principles involved. They took a steamboat back to Schlessig, and recrossing the river strolled slowly up the hill. The Baron gave Merland gently to understand, that, while on the one hand his worldly Karma had certainly been of a kind which need not have entailed upon him any acute distress, he was also without the peculiar advantages arising from great spiritual progress accomplished in a former life which had asserted themselves powerfully in Annerly's case after the exhaustion of the influences bequeathed to his present life by the Roman incarnation of which they had heard something.

"All I would have you realise," the Baron said, "since a false analogy might otherwise have confused your judgment, is, that the circumstances under which it became a noble and heroic thing on Annerly's part to surrender his claims on the woman he loved so earnestly, have nothing to do in your case with a question you once asked—without getting an immediate answer."

"Baron," said Merland, not without agitation of feeling, "do you know some-

thing more about this matter than you have yet told me? I have seen through the blind conceit which made me put that very inappropriate question, and have long since submitted to the justice of the arrangement which kept back from me anything so unnecessary as an answer."

"My friend, it would be contrary to my habits and rather taking me out of my proper sphere if I played the part of love's messenger. And I have no message for you from Miss Vaughan—if you mean that; but I have got something to tell you about her. She and her mother are returning for a while to the castle."

"Coming back here!"

"Even so, and very shortly. They have been good enough to feel a strong desire to see a little more of me before I go away for what may be a long absence, and they only realised lately that I should not be able to return after this autumn to London; so, instead of going to their own house in Devonshire, they have decided once more to honour Heiligenfels."

"Baron," said Merland, some time after

this as they approached the castle, "it is natural, very natural, that they should want to see you again, but after what has passed—except on one very extravagant supposition—it would be pleasanter for them both, perhaps, that they should not find me here. It may be, indeed, that they imagine I have already gone."

"It is a delicate and nice feeling on your part that suggests what you propose; but Mrs. Vaughan made no terms in arranging to come back, and I do not think you are called upon to shrink from meeting them. If you would rather indeed know how you stand in the graces of the lady you are most concerned with ——"

The Baron hesitated as he spoke, and they came in under the outer archway leading into the first courtyard—the courtyard in the middle of which were flower-beds, and from the battlemented terrace of which there opened the door leading into the conservatory. Standing at this door they saw Captain Miller in his favourite morning-coat of brown velvet. It was a little past lunch-time.

"If in point of fact," said the Baron, as he greeted the Captain with a wave of the hand, and as they walked round the terrace to join him, "if you want at once to get an answer to the question which still awaits its reply—go in and ask for it."

He put his hand on Merland's shoulder as he spoke, turning him round towards the conservatory door, and then, slipping his arm into Captain Jem's, walked on, leaving the young man alone.

"Go in and ask for it."

With expectations raised to fever heat, and yet with a feeling that the glorious possibility suggested was *impossible*, Merland entered. Standing by the same open window where he had seen her last, alone, and in the same grey dress she had worn that morning, above which glowed in her cheeks, as it were, the same magnificent flush, which the first surprise of his audacity had called forth, the beautiful Miss Vaughan was there before him. Had he met her again under any other circumstance his greeting would have been one of respectful reserve; but her look, her smile—a little shy

and confused; the overwhelming significance of the whole situation, evoked an emotion in her lover's heart which swept away all thought of playing a part.

"Lucy," he cried, in wild delight, springing forward; and, with passionate adoration seizing her hand, he knelt once more to kiss it.

"I have been slow in giving you an answer," she said; "but you know you took me by surprise. You offered me a flower, if I remember rightly."

He could never tell how it got there, but as she spoke he felt that something was slipped into his hand. In that castle of enchantment it was relatively a little thing to happen, but, by some wonderful play of the forces that were all around them there, a sprig of stephanotis had settled between his fingers.

"It is here!" he cried in astonishment, and Lucy took it.

For a little while the meaning of its acceptance blotted out between them all thought even of occult wonders.

"But did you know I was here? Did you

come provided with that flower?" asked Lucy.

"No. Not till I saw the glorious sight of you did I know you were here."

"Look! There is a little curl of paper round it. See, there is writing on it."

They examined the morsel of paper, and the words it bore were: "With a friend's blessing on the betrothal."

"Oh Lucy! How is it possible you can have granted me the stupendous gift which all this signifies? When I made my desperate declaration I was simply blind to everything else but my overwhelming love and your supreme loveliness. I only learned later how monstrously unbecoming it was for me to speak to you in this way."

"I have often been made love to, Claude, but, on thinking it over, this seemed to me the first time I had loved back."

THE END.

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